



Voiceflex ramps up hosted market ambitions P12

Midwich CEO raises UC&C stakes with Nimans deal p18



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“We’re continuing to work towards the 2025 deadline, when BT Group and the wider comms industry plans to switch off the PSTN.”

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This month's movers and shakers



BT stalls roll out of Digital Voice

BT HAS put the brakes on its Digital Voice home phone upgrade as it seeks to establish a more resilient roll out. But the 2025 PSTN switch off still holds.

SPECIAL REPORT

BT conceded that it underestimated the disruptive impact its digital upgrade would have on some customers.

"We went too early, before many customers understood why this change is necessary and what they needed to do," commented Consumer division CEO Marc Allera.

"We have more work to do on getting better back-up solutions in place for when things disrupt the service."

Allera noted that the havoc caused by recent storms Arwen and Eunice swept the issue into sharp focus.

"Many lines were cut, including older phone lines as well as power lines – so making calls with a broadband-only connection would not have been possible," he added.

"We have more work to do to improve network resilience, working with energy providers on faster power restoration and providing better back-up solutions for customers."

Openreach confirmed that BT remains committed to the FTTP trials in Salisbury and Mildenhall. "We're working closely with BT and other providers to iron out issues and make sure customers can be migrated smoothly and efficiently," said James Lilley (pictured), Director for Managed Customer Migrations, Openreach.

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EDITOR'S COMMENT



Stuart Gilroy

IT'S amazing what can be achieved when heads get properly together: Just look at the speed of Covid-19 vaccine development and its roll out in the UK. Consider the superfast response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in terms of widespread and coordinated sanctions plus direct

military and other aid. Observe how solutions to dependencies on Russian gas were quickly found, with, for example, massive shipments of liquified natural gas from the US all agreed (a by-product of all this being a much sharper focus on green energy alternatives).

These three examples were catalysed by mega-urgent priorities and from the get-go appeared like mountains to climb. Yet heads working purposefully together towards common goals delivered much needed results regardless of the challenges, and accelerated existing priorities. If we apply these lessons of leadership, brainstorming, consultation, collaboration and action to our industry, how much better can we be?

A requirement for cross-industry discourse has emerged, and major issues do cry out for a collaborative approach. How else can we fibre up the UK more quickly? How else can we collectively offset some of the financial pressures facing channel businesses and protect or increase value and margins? How else can we accelerate net zero goals except through working more closely together?

This is no pipe dream: For example, CityFibre is in the early stages of developing a collaborative boost to its full fibre network build (see page 28), and Eclipse Wholesale has called for the channel to combat a range of pressures by discussing cost rises in the industry (see page 26). Both see inherent strength in working closely with likeminded counterparts. And the theme of collective responsibility in the channel is certain to grow. It may become the only viable option in the ever challenging comms sector.

Stuart Gilroy, Editor

Pragma diversifies with Techland deal

A NEW channel-focused powerhouse with capabilities to support resellers across multiple technologies has been formed following Pragma's acquisition of Bracknell-based distributor Techland to create EnableX Group (which encompasses three go to market brands – Pragma, Candio and Techland).

The deal sees Sussex-based Pragma add a Platinum Partner of Ribbon's UC enablement technology and provides a boost to its recurring revenues, driven in large part by Techland's support of resellers as end users adopted Microsoft Teams and Zoom collaboration applications into their technology stack through the deployment of Ribbon technologies.

EnableX Group will support over 250 resellers and its vendor relationships include Ericsson-LG, Ribbon and SO Connect as key partnerships.

The new Group will be led by CEO Will Morey (formerly Pragma's Sales & Marketing Director), CFO Dean Mayer (Techland MD and investor), while Tim Brooks (Pragma MD) becomes Commercial Director.

"This transaction is an opportunity for us to continue to build a strong and grow-



Will Morey

ing business that remains 100% dedicated to the reseller channel," said Morey.

"The similar ethos and culture of both businesses was a huge driver in getting this deal done and underpins our focus on continuing to bring propositions to high growth resellers."

In particular, Techland opens up significant opportunities for the Group in supporting deployments of Microsoft Teams and Zoom with Ribbon SBCs and direct routing as-a-service technologies; while Pragma UCaaS and Candio SaaS continue to deliver high adoption rates through their channels.

EnableX Group worked with Knight Corporate Finance to raise growth funding from BOOST&Co for the deal.

Mayer added: "Having spent most of my career in private equity I have been looking to invest and play a role in driving growth in a fast moving technology business.

"EnableX is just that and provides a huge opportunity for our vendor partners, resellers and the team."

Ahed Alkhatib, Global Head of Sales, Ericsson-LG Enterprise, observed: "This new group provides increased opportunities for all of the stakeholders while maintaining their focus and capability on iPECS Cloud."

Commenting on the deal Lily Communications MD Chris Morrissy said: "This transaction gives us access to a broader technology proposition."



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NEWS ROUNDUP

PULSANT'S south east presence has been boosted by the acquisition of Reading-based data centre and cloud services provider Amito. The deal follows Pulsant's acquisition of a Manchester data centre and associated clients from M247 in early January. Pulsant CEO Rob Coupland said: "The south east is a strategically important location for our clients and will continue to drive much of the UK's economic activity. With Amito's presence we can bolster our scale and capacity in the region. This will become increasingly important as businesses embrace edge computing and demand increases." Pulsant plans to bring edge computing to every region of the UK.

TELCOSWITCH has been ranked 406th in the Financial Times' FT 1000 list which features European companies with the highest CAGR in revenue between 2017 and 2020. TelcoSwitch also ranked seventh out of 20 telecoms providers in Europe, and 78th out of 155 UK-based companies listed. CEO Russell Lux commented: "This is the first time we have been included in the FT 1000 list so it is a special moment for everyone involved with TelcoSwitch."

IT support firm takes EOT route

DEESIDE-based IT support firm Pro-Networks has become an Employee-Owned Trust (EOT), meaning that all staff have shares held on their behalf by the EOT.

The move follows the retirement of founder and former MD Paul Crudge who handed over the business he built up for 20 years to all employees within the trust. This ownership model was first introduced by the Government in 2014.

A new board has also been formed including incoming CEO Geoff Coote and two Non-Executive Directors, Ian Traynor and Stephen Blank.

An Employee Advisory Council (EAC) will consist of a number of employees including a Chair and a representative of each department. "Our focus will be more aligned with the employee-customer relationship which is in our combined interests," said Coote.



Geoff Coote

Ethos sells Evad to fast growing Focus

JUST over a year since Focus Group snared swcomms to become a £100m business the company has acquired Derby-based Evad from Ethos Group which is doubling down on its core print business.

Soon after acquiring swcomms in February 2021 Focus Group strengthened its Scottish presence with the purchase of HighNet in April 2021 and GB Technologies last October.

The Evad deal also enables both brands to extend their geographical reach and diversify product portfolios.

Evad, which will continue to operate under its brand name with CEO Matt Hill and Sales Director Richard Osborn at the helm, has particular expertise in contact centres, PCI compliant platforms, professional services and healthcare.

"There is a cultural fit between the two companies that will create great collaborations and opportunities for geographical reach across the midlands," said Focus Group Sales Director Rhys Bailey.

"Evad will bring experience in contact centres, enterprise business solutions and healthcare expertise. Focus Group will enable Evad to diversify its



Matt Hill, Rhys Bailey and Richard Osborn

product portfolio with IT, cyber and connectivity services."

Commenting on the deal, Osborn stated: "The opportunity to become part of Focus Group was too good to miss and perfectly timed as Ethos looks to pursue the growth of its core digital print business."

Ethos CEO Barry Matthews noted: "Even though Evad was part of the group for over 10 years we had no doubt that it was the best decision for Ethos Group and its subsidiaries."

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BCN beefs up NHS presence



Rob Davies

BCN Group's play in the health-care sector has received a boost following its acquisition of benchmarking and analytics software business Public View.

The deal follows last year's purchase of analytics, data and automation specialist Cloud2, and adds performance monitoring and benchmarking services to the NHS underpinned by Microsoft, .Net and Azure Cloud Platform.

Public View collates data from hundreds of public data

sources automatically and combines them into a single portal for NHS leaders to see areas that are high performing, progressing or a cause for concern.

BCN Group CEO Rob Davies commented: "The acquisition allows us to provide existing and new clients with a suite of cloud-based analytics services. It takes our combined capability to the next level."

Public View founder Tom Ridgeway launched the business to the market in 2018.

NEWS ROUNDUP

FAST rising Scottish technology provider Dunedin IT is targeting record £2m turnover this year boosted by a completed project to install superfast fibre at the 3,000-year-old Bamburgh Castle in Northumberland. Dunedin IT also completed work for the Scottish Wildlife Trust to improve the Internet at the Loch of the Lowes Visitor Centre & Wildlife Reserve near Dunkeld.

BT's GROUP-wide digital transformation project is to be supported by Google Cloud, including cloud infrastructure, machine learning, artificial intelligence, data analytics, security and API management. "This is one of a series of strategic moves that BT Digital is taking to help accelerate BT's growth and digital transformation," commented Harmeen Mehta, Chief Digital and Innovation Officer. "This partnership is deeper than just at the technology level. It will help digital as a whole supercharge BT and drive its return to growth." Google and BT plan to complete the core migration of data by 2023.

PRD Technologies credited with speeding billing cycles

PRD Technologies' Intelligent Billing platform has been credited with slashing XMA's VAR billing cycle by over 300 hours per month.

PRD had already delivered a bespoke version of its Intelligent Billing platform to Westcoast Cloud, removing complexity from the billing process and enabling it to scale up its own billing from £18m to over £80m per annum.

XMA's expansion into the CSP space sparked the need for a new billing system and a recommendation from Westcoast prompted it to trial the platform.

"After a swift and successful implementation XMA increased its billing through the new platform from £100k to over £200k per month within a three month period," stated PRD Technologies MD Simon Adams. "PRD has now been contracted as XMA's ongoing billing platform provider."

XMA's customers include the NHS, Ofsted, The Cabinet Office, University of Oxford and Viacom. The company is listed on over 25 government procurement networks and is a primary reseller of Google and Apple into education.

James Thorogood, CSP Business Manager at XMA, stated: "Previously the billing process was cumbersome and complex. We used seven programmes and several manual processes to collate, calculate and invoice our billing data. Now we have one automated system."

Adams added: "We want to take the layers of admin and margin for error away from distributors and resellers."

Westcoast Cloud MD Mark Davies commented: "The system has enabled us to substantially grow our business over the last four years."



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NEWS ROUNDUP

MIDLANDS-based CHH CoNeX is under new ownership in a development that sees MD Tim Hughes exit the company. The new owners, CEO Paul Turner and COO Cory McFarlane, take over a business that has experienced significant growth and is poised to explore international markets. Turner joins from networking manufacturer Belden where he was Senior Vice President of Sales, and McFarlane moves from IEWC EMEA where he was MD. IEWC is a supplier of electrical wire and cable, wire management, broadcast and AV products. Hughes commented: "In Paul and Cory we have found a good home for our company which should enable it to pursue further growth."

SWORD Group has acquired Scottish network and security systems integrator Ping Network Solutions, adding circa £10.8m revenue and tech partnerships with Cisco and Palo Alto Networks. Sword UK CEO Dave Bruce commented: "This deal will allow us to deliver a more complete range of solutions." Terry Neill, Ping's Business Unit Director, added: "Delivering network and security solutions will complement Sword's current service offerings."

Keynoters set for first XaaS Summit

OMDIA Chief Analyst for Enterprise Services Camille Mendler and author, broadcaster and coach Hamish Taylor will deliver high profile keynotes at the inaugural XaaS Summit on May 5th held at etc.venues St Paul's in the City of London.

Staged by Comms Dealer magazine and sister company IT Europa the XaaS Summit is structured to accelerate ICT resellers' transition into becoming broader services-based organisations with greater potential for growth.

"A range of sessions will help channel organisations build a comprehensive portfolio of service-based solutions and develop a truly managed services offering," said Comms Dealer Editorial Director Nigel Sergeant. "For many years our events have been a trusted source of new ideas and insights



Camille Mendler



Hamish Taylor

for channel partners, and the XaaS Summit will continue to provide much needed education and pathways for delegates to develop new propositions, grow revenue and build value."

In her keynote Mendler will explore the forces shaping technology buying decisions and highlight the ICT solutions in most demand.

Taylor – who is credited with helping PWC, British Airways, Proctor & Gamble, Eurotunnel and Sainsbury's Bank put customers at the heart of their propositions – will share practical examples and takeaways designed to help delegates build greater customer value.

The XaaS Summit agenda and sessions will also spotlight the latest developments in (among other areas) zero trust, UC, CX and IoT in plenary, panel and Q&A formats.

XaaS is free to attend for channel partners. To find out more and register please visit www.xaas-summit.com

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NEWS ROUNDUP

MICROSOFT partner Incremental has been acquired by Telefónica Tech for circa £175m. The deal boosts Telefónica Tech's workforce to around 1,000 in the UK and bolsters its Microsoft capabilities. Telefónica Tech CEO José Cerdán said: "We are now able to provide end-to-end Microsoft services including digital transformation, managed services and data analytics, as well as achieve attractive cross-selling synergies with Telefónica Tech UK&I."

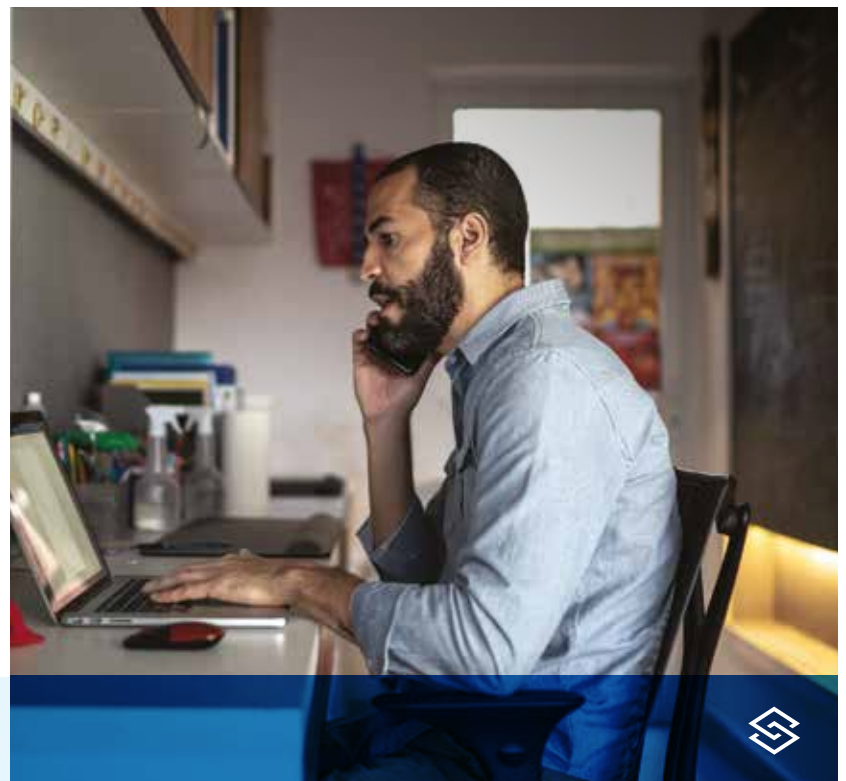
RADIUS Payment Solutions' midlands presence in the comms space has been strengthened by the acquisition of Shirley-based Air Telecom. The deal adds almost 20,000 customers to its comms arm Radius Connect and gives Radius opportunities to grow its services including telecoms fuel cards, telematics, insurance and electric vehicles. Crewe-based Radius was founded in 1990 by CEO Bill Holmes and has over 2,000 employees across 18 countries. Its annual turnover exceeds £2.6bn. "We look forward to overlaying the range of products and services Radius has developed over the last few years," said Holmes.



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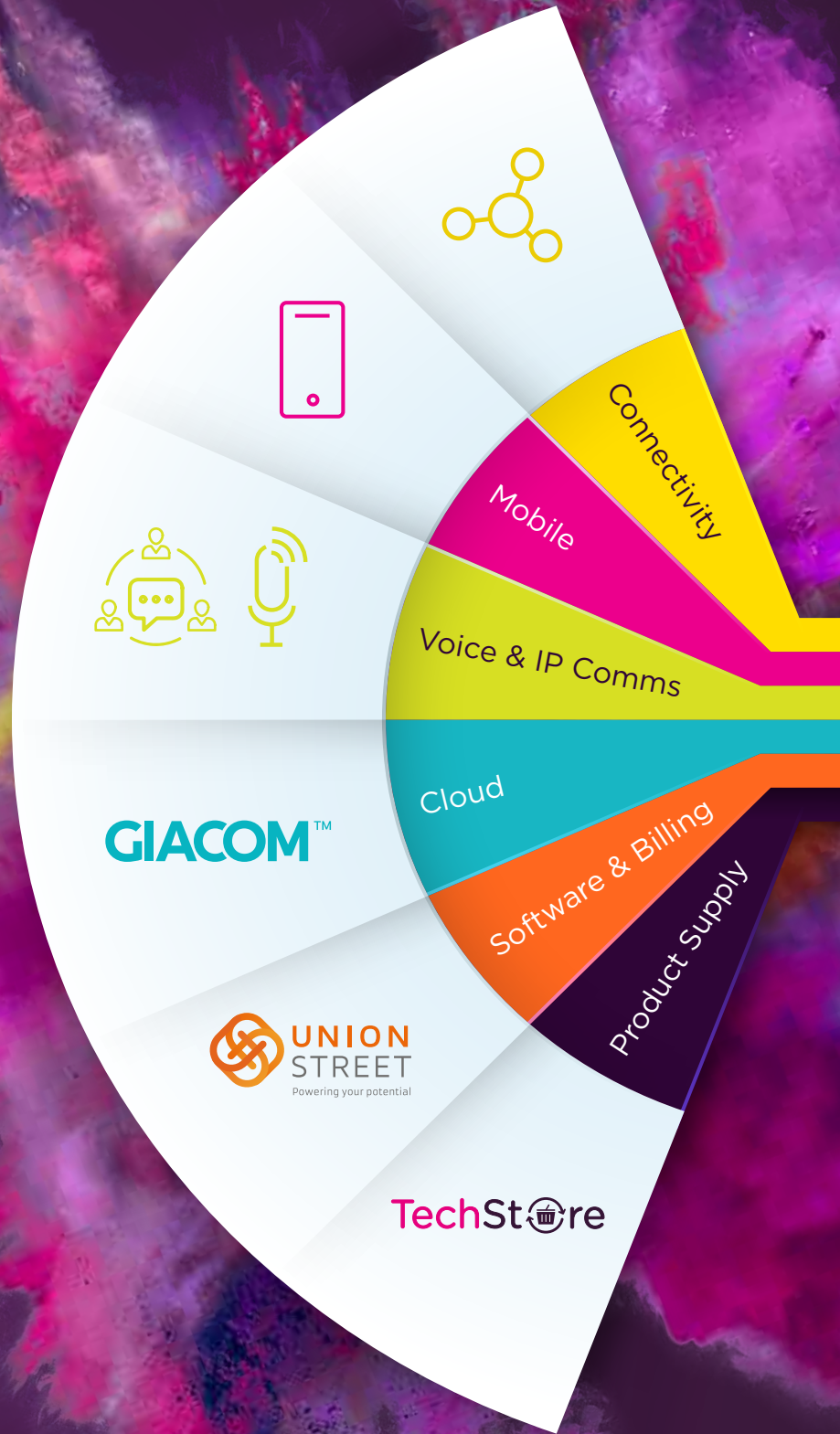
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NEWS ROUNDUP

REDCENTRIC'S security portfolio and capability has received a boost following its acquisition of 7 Elements, a CREST accredited business providing security testing, incident response management and managed vulnerability scanning. "We acquired additional capability in the increasingly important security market as part of the recent Piksel acquisition, and 7 Elements enables us to improve and enhance our offering," stated Redcentric CEO Peter Brotherton.

THE rise of pandemic-driven hybrid working models has prompted Mitel to launch subscription-based offers across all primary platforms including MiVoice Business, MiVoice Office 400, MiVoice 5000 and MiVoice MX-ONE. "In the past two years the role of communications in organisations has shifted from simple utility to business-critical capability," said Tarun Loomba, President and CEO. Oru Mohiuddin, Research Manager, UCC, IDC Europe, added: "It is important to remove the traditional barriers to software adoption through subscription-based models. They give customers the flexibility to access the latest cloud technologies and respond rapidly to changing market demands."

IT biz shrinks work week to four days

HIGHGATE IT Solutions is to trial a four-day working week during the business quarter starting 1st April 2022.

The company has adopted the 100:80:100 model, which means it will commit to 100% pay for 80% of the time in return for 100% productivity.

"The last two years have been challenging for lots of us in many ways," commented Highgate IT Solutions Sales Director Bob Sahota.

"It has provided us with new perspectives on life and emphasised the importance of two key areas – employee wellbeing and the value of time.

"Highgate is more than a business or brand, it is our ever evolving vision of what a harmonious work-life balance should look like, one without stress, pressure or anxiety. One that enables people to become the best version of themselves, inside and outside of work.

"By moving to a four-day week we are giving everyone back the most valuable thing in life – time."

Sahota noted that organisations that have already made the move to a four-day working week have reported increases in performance and profit.



Bob Sahota

Another upside is the attraction of the scheme to potential employees plus higher employee retention rates.

"There are plenty of potential commercial benefits of moving to a four-day week including increased revenue, increased productivity, lower staff turnover and attracting new talent, but none of them are our motivator for this," added Sahota.

"When you build a business focused purely on increasing turnover and profit by any means necessary you can lose

sight of what is really important. For us, the journey is more important than the destination.

"Employee wellbeing and their mental health is the key-stone of our business and I strongly believe that a four-day week that consists of 28 hours will improve all of our lives."

Highgate was certified Carbon Neutral Plus in February. Jenny Latimer, Alliances Manager & Sustainability Lead, said: "Moving to a four-day working week will also help to reduce our carbon emissions."

Tech staff primed to jump ship

IT WORKERS are by far the most likely to be looking to seek new opportunities with just 29% having 'high intent' to stay with their current employer. The Gartner survey also points to looming IT talent retention issues for CIOs.

"While talent retention is a common C-level concern, CIOs are at the epicentre with a huge chunk of their workforce at risk," said Graham Waller, VP and Distinguished Analyst.

"We've heard of IT organisations implementing back-to-the-office policies only to face mass resignations and have had to reverse course.

"CIOs may need to advocate for more flexibility in workplace design than the rest of the enterprise, as IT employees are more likely to leave, they are in greater demand and more adept at remote working than most other employees."

Gartner analysts said that CIOs should use a data-driven approach to identify workers who are most at risk and most valuable, and tailor hybrid work policies to keep them engaged and high-performing.

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We see both sides of M&A deals because they're catalysts for large technical projects that migrate customer bases between platforms and technologies.

Support to Win often gets asked to start planning such projects within 100 days of M&A deal completion – and we can make a huge difference.

Spring clean your estate

My advice to sellers is to get your house in order, pre-deal, to achieve the exit value you're after. We can support this process by:

- Successfully onboarding customers to new services
- Completing thorny migration projects
- Adding skills and impetus to your internal projects team
- Mapping your estate for buyer visibility

Sometimes the sale process can distract resources away from special projects work or business-as-usual. As a comms smart sourcing partner, Support to Win can take up the strain wherever necessary.

Accelerate return on investment

Underpinning every M&A deal is a business case that hinges on market capture, operational efficiency and economies of scale. Support to Win makes that a reality for M&A buyers and investors too.

Very often it's the on-the-ground execution of a technical migration process that makes or breaks a boardroom strategy. A technically ambitious strategy needs the skills to back it up; particularly those rarer implementation skills around telephony.

But conservative strategies can also benefit from being



Tamsin Deutrom-Yue

better informed – and bolder – about what's possible. Having Support to Win on side lets you see the hidden potential of your acquired assets and can accelerate ROI.

Reduce platform migration risk

Comms providers and partners also have other strategic imperatives that go beyond M&A. Naturally Support to Win plays a part here too. One such is platform migrations, where the provider makes a strategic decision to shift their offering or diversity onto multiple platforms.

The issue here is mitigating the risk of migrating your existing customers to a relatively unfamiliar environment – ensuring they don't churn.

The same goes for onboarding new customers, which has to happen right first time because you never get a second chance.

Contact me at Support to Win to discuss your post-acquisition requirements or to talk through the smart sourcing options for maximising exit value.

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Strategic talk

Managing the pandemic has led many business leaders to a greater sense of strategic purpose, and in the case of IntraLAN CEO Andy Horn much of his approach has been re-evaluated.



Andy Horn

Anyone who's successfully kept a business running over the past two years is unlikely to be the same leader they were pre-pandemic, believes Horn. "I've learned many valuable lessons," he said. "Communication is more essential than ever to maintain and motivate staff and build meaningful connections with customers. Furthermore, developing a good insight into the mental wellbeing of your team will inform you of the best way to engage them in the business. The pandemic highlighted that a leader who prioritises strong communication skills is best positioned to succeed."

The channel's business leaders today, perhaps, face many more challenges and opportunities than ever before, also changing the nature of traditional leadership. "The expectations of what's required to lead a team are in a constant state of flux," commented Horn. "Right now, those who can work flexibly to meet both the needs of their customers and their teams are primed for success. However, there will always be the traditional expectations from a business leader, such as being able to instil confidence in their team."

For Horn, another key takeaway from the Covid-19 pandemic was a reaffirmation of the value that resides in small service teams and the dedicated customer support that they deliver. "This has proven important over the last 20 months," he added. "Smaller teams mean better customer support. They are also more manageable for business leaders."

Work bubbles

As Covid continued its advance, IntraLAN recognised that not everyone's workspace at home was ideal, especially for younger engineers. "Setting up work bubbles for those small teams helped alleviate some of the pressures incurred by working from home while still driving a high level of customer support," explained Horn. "Making efforts like this to support our team didn't just keep the ship afloat during the pandemic, it cultivated a positive, cohesive team structure that put us in a great position to succeed."

Pre-Covid, channel sales were traditionally about achieving annual sales targets in the slickest manner. Fast-forward to today, and it's the most flexible, agile businesses that are thriving, observed Horn. In this context, one of his current priorities

is to continue building a strong partner network supported by a full spectrum of services, particularly those that boost cloud integration.

"Migrating customers to the cloud in a straightforward way is vital," he commented. "The rise of cloud operations will play a significant role in protecting customers going forward. With built-in redundancies, regular backups, contingencies to prevent IT downtime and outages, the cloud is increasing uptime across the board."

The growing threat of malware and cyber attacks that come with greater cloud integration will be offset by a diverse partner network and keeping a finger on the pulse of emerging technology, believes Horn. "Even more important is learning how these emerging technologies can best serve customers," he commented. "The Internet of Things and Artificial Intelligence are two examples of increasingly valuable innovations we can utilise and sell in the channel. Understanding new trends isn't only beneficial for us as a company, because keeping customers informed of emerging technology illustrates the value of MSPs." ■

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Voiceflex in full flow

A link up between Swedish comms provider Telavox and SIP carrier Voiceflex marks a significant ramping up of the UK service provider's play in the hosted space.

The partnership follows the arrival of James Arnold-Roberts as Voiceflex CEO last September – an appointment that signalled the beginning of a new phase of expansion with a potential acquisition in the ISP space being a distinct possibility as the £8 million business seeks to double revenues and profitability over the coming three years, driven in large part by the success of its new hosted solution called Voiceflex Flow in partnership with Telavox.

Telavox has circa 30 per cent market share in its home country and all told the company has sold 750,000 licences across Sweden, Spain, Italy and Portugal. That said, Telavox is largely an unknown entity in the UK channel but Voiceflex Sales and Marketing Director Paul Taylor emphasised that this is about to change following its launch of Voiceflex Flow.

With orders piling up the first installs of the UC-first hosted solution kicked off on March 28th and Taylor's plan is to migrate as many of Voiceflex's 900 reseller base to the new platform as soon as possible prior to addressing the wider channel, including ISPs. "We are providing our own partners with demonstrations and orders are already coming

in," stated Taylor. "The appetite is immense."

Taylor confirmed that all elements are in place to embark immediately on a significant campaign to make an impact in the market, with engineers trained and additional staff on boarded. "We've taken our development team from five to ten and added sales people," he said. "Across the company we've increased the wage bill by around 30 per cent."

It is clear already that Voiceflex's partnership with Telavox is characterised by a different dynamic compared to prior associations with large tech partners in the hosted space. "We looked all around the world to find a product that fitted our ethos, an organisation that was UC-first and embedded in MS Teams – not just middleware, but embedded," stated Taylor. "Like us, Televox is an 18 year old company and the two founders still own the majority of shares. We wanted to add value to a partner that wanted to make us successful. Over the coming year we are looking to sell 5,000 licences, which is an aggressive target."

Taylor expects Voiceflex Flow to appeal to resellers with a hosted product that doesn't



Paul Taylor

cover UC, and resellers that want something new and fresh in the marketplace with USPs. It will also appeal to IT resellers leveraging Voiceflex's Nebula application as a straightforward upgrade to full UC, and will catch the eye of resellers just selling PBXs. "It's an easy migration," added Taylor.

Portal power

Key to the success of Voiceflex Flow will be a new portal that's also about to launch. "The beta version should go live at the beginning of April – six weeks later our number porting will be fulfilled online," added Taylor. "We try to automate everything with open APIs so there is no manual intervention, everything goes through automatically. Televox issues the licenses and ProVu provisions the handsets – the process takes just days."

Telavox made a decision to work with service providers and systems integrators only. And because Sweden is mobile-first it did not envisage anyone selling phones, so it developed an entry level licence for Voiceflex that just takes a handset – so you have the handset licence, the UC licence, and the omnichannel applications which will be available in May.

"Partners are able to purchase omnichannel licencing and then select the required applications – WhatsApp, email etc – rather than have to buy a full licence for just one application," stated Taylor. "This gives our channel the ability to really pick and mix according to their clients' needs."

As part of its strategic approach, Voiceflex produced

a battle card to assess how to best compete in the market, and Taylor noted that there are few UC-first applications available. To add more differentiation, he said that Voiceflex has a strong pedigree in bringing out new products and doing them slightly differently.

"For example, our international SIP trunking is going ballistic," he added. "For instance, where a user has a MS instance in the UK and a colleague in France or Germany etc, we provide local break out in those countries."

SIP has long been Voiceflex's meat and drink, and its SIP trunk shipments in 2021 went up by 20 per cent, with Microsoft Teams Direct Routing rising by 80 per cent. "We're selling 3,000 SIP trunks a month," added Taylor. "Demand is coming from our whole channel."

Indeed, the company took on 132 new resellers last year, and at the time of writing added 14 more this year. "We try to be as disruptive as possible in terms of services and pricing," commented Taylor.

Voiceflex's SoGEA and FTTP business is also 'going great guns', observed Taylor. "We are trying to get as many of our resellers to move across to the platform as soon as possible," he added. "We run our own LTP2 connectivity – it's our own realm and our IP addresses. The end point might be another telco but everything comes into our platform. And we are about to add SIM cards to routers as a back-up for data connectivity. Another development is providing PCI over SIP trunks." ■



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Harling's view

CAE Technology Services CEO Justin Harling on harnessing disruption, the evolution of leadership, the power of automation and where he finds inspiration.



Justin Harling

A combination of technology, adaptability and communication built on a strong culture can surmount any challenge, according to Harling. "Having faith in what we do best and the people in the business is more than a match for short-term disruption and is likely to continue to be put to the test by macro factors outside of our control," he stated. "Focusing on what is inside our control will allow us to continue to grow and develop."

Although turnover dropped by 11 per cent during the pandemic, profitability increased by 44 per cent. "Services played a crucial part in this," added Harling. "There were areas of the business where we questioned if they could be delivered remotely. The pandemic completely changed that way of thinking and allowed us to fully embrace flexibility. This extended into customer environments where being physically present was highlighted as being less important than the actual value being delivered. The challenge is to maintain all the good habits we have learned as the top line returns to growth this year."

Hybrid working, says Harling, with all its benefits

and challenges, is here to stay. "Investing into a new headquarters during the pandemic is going to massively support this by making sure everyone has a home and a place to actively collaborate and get together," he added. "A significant bonus is that the amount of paper used in the business has dropped to almost zero."

Priorities

Harling's main priority is to grow in all core areas and ensure that it has the skills, structures and systems to support this, while maintaining the culture that has seen it through not only the last couple of years, but the last 30. "I hope we have seen the end of the cult of leadership and dictatorial approaches," added Harling. "As a leader there is a responsibility to the whole organisation to set out a purpose that unifies and that allows the best to be brought out of people over the long-term. The biggest challenge is talent. The market is pushing rates to an unsustainable level, but I hope our ongoing commitment to development balances out some of those short-term pressures."

The pandemic has spotlighted the critical importance of adaptability and communication, noted Harling. "Extra time and

effort in these areas is always going to be time well spent and leaves us better equipped to face the future," he added. "But the cloud is not uniformly the answer and there is greater thought going into how workloads should be managed in a hybrid way. The opportunity is absolutely there for technology to continue to transform the way things are done and core infrastructure is underpinning what organisations need to do to change."

Also of great interest to Harling is automation, which is underpinning CAE's investment in its own application development practice. Strong results already demonstrate how creative thinking can revolutionise the way all kinds of tasks are performed. Creative thinking, of course, requires inspiration, which Harling says can be found anywhere.

"As well as reading and consuming as many thoughts and ideas as possible, I am constantly inspired by what our people do every single day," he commented. "Our people stories are always the most inspiring. Furthermore, during periods at home, seeing my daughters learn gave a unique perspective on problem solving and how to approach change." ■

Six leadership lessons learnt

The big questions: Strategically, what did you learn from lockdown? And are you a better director post-pandemic? Abzorb COO Matt Dykes responds...

1) Have a Plan

The time in lockdown gave me breathing space to realise how important it is to have a plan and take a step back. It taught me to not waste the quiet time and use it to reflect on what we we're doing. It was a gift to take time out and re-evaluate.

2) Be Decisive

As a leader you must be decisive and have faith in your decisions. During lockdown it was crucial that I instilled confidence in our staff and motivated them during the hard times. People were worried about their jobs, their health and families and it was my role to help them accept the situation and reiterate the NHS Covid message that 'we are all in this together' and to have compassion for the team and myself.

3) Be Flexible

To be a successful leader you must be adaptable and plan for the worst case scenario, be willing to listen to others, discuss it and work out what you need to do. To be flexible is key. Working from home is now accepted, whereas before only a handful of people worked remotely. Those days are gone.

4) Collaborating

The pandemic has taught me how to listen and collaborate more effectively. No one

could meet face-to-face, and we all had meetings over the phone or video conferencing, so everyone had to adapt. We had to focus more on listening to others and letting people speak more.

5) Empathy

Some people are naturally empathetic, but others aren't, and I did count myself in the latter, certainly in business. However, since the pandemic I have become more empathetic. Lockdown has personalised work and taught me that we are all human whether at work or at home. We learnt the lessons of putting peoples' needs and wellbeing before work. If we are not mentally and physically fit then we cannot work to our full extent. And a leader who listens, is empathetic and acts accordingly is more valuable to staff.

6) Self-care

This also extends to self-care, I had Covid in February 2021 and was too ill to speak or work, so everything had to be cancelled. This made me realise that as a leader you must look after yourself in order to be well and fit to work and manage a team. I communicated to my team just how important self-care and well-being is. The pandemic has taught us that people matter first, and work comes second. ■

Billers called on to comply with new Ofcom regulation

It is vital that billing providers urgently meet the demands of Ofcom's most recent update to its General Conditions, which came into effect in December 2021, according to Tekton Director Harry McKeever. "These additions include a new definition for micro-enterprises – those businesses with under ten staff – and new standards for visibility of tariff/bundle consumption and notifications of tariff/bundle exhaustion," he stated. "We cannot understate the importance of aligning with these new rules and ensuring existing billing platforms are compliant."

Aside from keeping up with regulatory changes, resellers have started broadening their portfolios with managed IT, utility and SaaS products. "These services still need adding to bills with the same granular controls on pricing and bundles etc," added McKeever. "These subscription and metered-based propositions are another opportunity for channel businesses to differentiate by incorporating them into their billing systems, reducing the number of bills customers receive and offering a more seamless experience. This is only possible if the billing portal and self-service features are properly engineered on the back-end from the outset. Not all existing platforms can do that, or reverse engineer those abilities."

McKeever is a firm believer in resellers using best of



Harry McKeever

breed software throughout CRM, service management, accounting and billing. But to avoid this becoming a constant re-keying exercise, comprehensive APIs, automation and slick integrations are essential. "Beyond back-office system integrations we're focusing on developing our existing

savings can be found with this economy of scale, yet being able to effectively manage and onward bill these rebundled services is not always supported by existing billing systems," he added.

In fact, traditional billing methods will likely become

We cannot understate the importance of aligning with these new rules and ensuring existing billing platforms are compliant

catalogue of external party integrations for provisioning and asset management with wholesale suppliers," added McKeever.

With data consumption on the rise, channel partners are increasingly buying big wholesale mobile data bundles and chopping them up to resell, observed McKeever. "Huge cost

redundant given the ISDN switch off, introduction of SoGEA, 5G, Teams and other UC services. "All this will make many traditional billing methods extinct," stated McKeever. "New and innovative methods of billing will accompany these technologies. It's up to billing vendors like us to listen to partners' needs and make the changes they want to see." ■

Energy is simply a revelation for PCG

With over 20 years of B2B industry knowledge behind them and access to all the major UK mobile networks and VoIP systems, it has been all systems go for Fahad Ijaz and Ben Carter since they launched Pure Communication Group (PCG) last year at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The duo has already secured 1000 customers and the latest partnership forged with Fidelity Energy is set to create a new pipeline of business, as Fahad explained.

"We have set up a 24-hour WhatsApp service which makes it easier for customers to send in their energy bills for review. This works well as most of our customers have their energy bills on their phones," he said.

"Selling energy alongside our core business is not a chore and slots in perfectly. The benefits are clear, and not just from a financial standpoint. With what is going on in the current markets, energy is only going to help enhance our relationships with customers further and enables us to continue to build the trust they have in us and retain their business for longer. The main reward for us is that we know we are doing the best for our customers, supporting them in multiple areas of their business and providing them with the highest level of service that we can."

Outlining what sold them on partnering with Fidelity Energy

Fahad said: "We first came across Fidelity Energy at a Currys' event towards the end of last year. We were advised to see what they had to offer, and it was an eye opener to understand how energy was affecting businesses. All the team were open and supportive whilst we were being onboarded and this has continued throughout the partnership. We would rate the experience 10 out of 10.

"The key evidence we get from customers is an energy bill, so we knew the synergy would work really well as we already have the establishment built with our customers to cross sell more easily.

"Our Business Development Manager, Clare Stratford, has made everything very easy for us. At PCG, we pride ourselves in doing things right, first time around and Clare is always happy to help us or answer any questions to ensure we are fully trained so we can help our customers without any errors.

"We now have a big deal in the pipeline which the Fidelity team are more than happy to help us with. We are also looking to be more proactive with energy and make it a core conversation talking point with customers.

"Providing energy as a service is a massive addition to our business and we would highly recommend Fidelity Energy to any other telecoms companies considering it," added Fahad.



PCG co-founder Fahad Ijaz

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Gamma rises in mobile

Developing a B2B mobile proposition has long been high on Gamma's agenda. Here, Rob Kittler, Head of the Connectivity Practice, offers insights into how the channel service provider finalised its strategy.

The story of Gamma's B2B mobile journey is as much about learning and overcoming roadblocks as it is about portfolio diversification and realising market potential for partners. "We understood the hiccups," stated Kittler. "It was clear we had coverage problems. With our legacy solution, we didn't have access to VoLTE (Voice over LTE), we didn't have native access to VoWiFi (Voice over Wi-Fi), and we didn't have access to the 800 MHz frequency band. We had to take a long hard look at what wasn't working in order to make the changes necessary to improve the service."

Gamma was attracted to Three UK, drawn by a strong proposition and investments in its existing and 5G network. "All it lacked was access to the B2B market," added Kittler. "This is where Gamma came in. We relaunched in May last year with an improved service which gave us immediate access to VoLTE, VoWiFi, the 800 MHz frequency band as well as Three UK's 5G network. In terms of coverage, it's a completely different and enhanced proposition. We're

currently migrating existing customers on our legacy service to the new solution, but any connection after the launch already has access to the new capabilities."

According to Kittler, Gamma's conversations with partners have a greater emphasis on differentiation and margins. "That shows how much the service has changed," he added. "The Three partnership has increased the opportunities for our partners. Gamma, and our partners, are the sole B2B providers of Three UK's services. The mobile opportunity is substantial."

The advantages of working with a channel service provider versus directly with an operator are many, noted Kittler, citing that a direct relationship involves jumping over hurdles, going through fiery hoops and hitting certain volumes and ARPU's. On the other hand, he says, working with a company like Gamma provides partners with greater flexibility. "Besides having differentiators such as Tariff Optimiser, we also have a marketing team and BDMS geared up to help partners," he added. Unlike larger



Rob Kittler

We relaunched in May last year with an improved service which gave us access to VoLTE, VoWiFi, the 800 MHz frequency band as well as Three UK's 5G network

MNOs that might not be able to provide such support, we believe it's a two-way street relationship and support partners on their journey."

Optimisation

As part of Gamma's fundamental re-think of its mobile strategy it introduced Tariff Optimiser, which manages the complex task of ensuring that customers have the best rate for their usage. "We thought long and hard about why we should do this," explained Kittler. "Unfortunately, the current marketplace has become slightly commoditised, and

on top of that, we fully understand that we've got ground to make up compared to our competitors.

"In this context, it's never been more important for us to bring value for our partners and their customers. While some may think we're giving up margin, it's a feature that will help us, and our partners, differentiate and increase volume in the long run. We want to empower partners by giving them a feature that could make a difference to their customers. We've seen a mix in how partners are

using this USP. Some are passing the saving directly to the end user, helping them win additional new business. Others are using it as a margin maximiser."

B2B mobile solutions are in high demand, and in the ever evolving world of mobility it is crucial for Gamma to continue to develop its strategy, including 5G plans. "We are still building our and Three's 5G story," added Kittler. "We haven't forgotten about IoT. It will come, but it's important to first lay the foundations. Stay tuned and watch this space." ■



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Midwich raises UC&C stake

AV distributor Midwich's February acquisition of Nimans for £27.5 million beefs up its presence in the UK comms and UC&C market at a stroke and provides a platform for a raft of synergistic opportunities, according to Midwich Group Managing Director Stephen Fenby.

It was plain to see in February 2020 that Fenby had a growing interest in UC&C when Midwich acquired Starin Marketing in the US, a company with a strong UC&C offering including a close relationship with Zoom and its approved hardware manufacturers. Then in April last year Midwich added the UC division of eLink in Germany – and with Nimans now in the camp it is crystal clear that Fenby is getting far more serious about the unified comms market.

Manchester-based Nimans was founded in 1981 and trades with over 2,500 telephony, IT and retail customers and employs over 200 staff. In its latest audited financial statements for the year ended 31st December 2020 Nimans generated revenues of £114.3 million and profit before tax of £5.8 million. The deal was funded from Midwich's existing facilities

and provides a boost to its unified comms ambitions.

"Nimans develops our UC&C offering, but also brings new relationships in the telecoms and IT markets," stated Fenby. "Everyone knows Nimans. It is a long standing business with a great reputation. I remember meeting the Sales Director Richard Carter many years ago and got to know David Bennett when he became Managing Director in 2018 following the death of founder Julian Niman. Both businesses have a similar culture, and although there was only a limited overlap in our technologies, vendors and customers, the potential to work together was interesting."

The evolution of enterprise communications and collaboration is a natural progression, and each successive wave of development introduces more complexity into the



Stephen Fenby

value chain, a good reason to build a one-stop-shop. "The convergence of AV, IT and UC&C is a major driver for our industry, accelerated by the pandemic," said Fenby. "Expanding our

drawing from multiple traditional technology areas to deliver single comprehensive solutions. The Nimans acquisition, and the expertise that comes with it, means we can

be admired. He has presided over a significant period of growth and expansion and Midwich's appetite for strategic buys means that no right-fit opportunity will be excluded. Before

The convergence of AV, IT and UC&C technologies is a major driver for our industry, accelerated by the pandemic

offering through the acquisition of Nimans gives us increased scope to help customers explore new revenue streams across our joint portfolios. End user projects and SI procurement policies are increasingly

help our customers deliver more complete solutions to our channel partners and gain access to new revenue streams."

On any showing Fenby's leadership of Midwich is to

joining Midwich 17-plus years ago Fenby was a director in the corporate finance team at Deloitte. He helped the Midwich team to buy out the business in 2001 and joined in 2004 as Finance Director. "My

kes with Nimans deal

share incentives for the team. Most of the senior management participate in an annual share option award. Midwich has also given free shares to staff to the extent that most of the team are shareholders in the business. "It has been quite a personal journey – from one office in the UK to operations across the world," added Fenby. "The group is about ten times the size it was when I joined."

Midwich now employs circa 1,300 staff in 20 countries and trades with around 24,000 customers worldwide. They vary from major international integrators to small installers. Key technology partners include Samsung, LG, Epson, Smart and Promethean. Midwich also has a long list of specialist niche manufacturers that show how far it has travelled since inception.

The company's journey began near Diss, Norfolk, in 1979. Initially it assembled computers and distributed computer components, later moving into IT peripherals such as printers. In 1995 the business started to sell the new AV products that were coming onto the market. "Shortly after I joined we decided to focus particularly on the AV market as we felt it had an exciting long-term potential, and we had built a good position in the UK," said Fenby. "We no longer sell computers but still have a print division. AV now accounts for over 95 per cent of group revenue which I believe makes us the largest specialist globally."

Midwich's financial results for the 12 months ending 31st December 2021 show

revenues up 23 per cent to £856 million, with adjusted profit up 130.3 per cent. Revenues have grown every year since 2005 although growth last year was above average. "Organic growth in 2021 was exceptionally high, I believe driven by the development of new vendor relationships and also through working hard at maintaining high customer service levels in tough market conditions," commented Fenby.

"Our net profit in 2020 had dropped due to the pandemic, although

The Nimans acquisition, and the expertise that comes with it, means we can help our customers deliver more complete solutions to channel partners

the bounce back in 2021 meant that we had our highest ever profit year. Our UK and Ireland business grew strongly as did the US operation. However, the largest growth was in EMEA – particularly France and Germany which grew at over 40 per cent and 30 per cent respectively."

The full story

Nimans' revenues have been fairly level for some time, but Fenby noted that top line growth doesn't always tell the full story. "In recent years Nimans has been adapting its business model to accommodate rapid and sustained market changes, particularly in the traditional telephony markets," added Fenby. "Joining with Midwich should help both businesses

to grow more quickly by cross selling products and developing new vendor relationships. The wider combined portfolio offers our customers access to complementary technologies and solutions that will enable growth. Conversely, it also offers our vendors an additional route to new prospective customers."

It is noteworthy that the deal separates Nimans from its reseller division called Avoira, which remains an investment of Nycomm Holdings, where Bennett continues as a Director. "A number of

users in global roll outs. But these days the task is accompanied by substantial challenges. "In the very short term our main priority is finding enough stock for our customers," explained Fenby. "Chip shortages and other Covid-related supply constraints mean that we are experiencing significant disruption to supply chains. We are holding as much relevant inventory as we can, but there continues to be significant disruption. These product shortages cause a significant additional workload to the team as we try to balance different demands and look after as many customers as possible."

Fenby adheres rigidly to three key elements that underpin his long-term strategy – increased specialisation, geographical expansion and growing scale. "Specialisation means adding new technical skills and technical products into our portfolio," he explained. "By doing this we make ourselves more relevant and useful to our customers. Geographical expansion improves how we can support customers and vendors in their overseas growth aspirations. Scale brings benefits from buying economies but also in sharing experience and contacts."

Fenby also noted that these pillars still leave much room for acquisitive manoeuvre. "We have bought between two and four businesses a year for many years," he said. "I expect this to continue and we have a steady stream of conversations and transactions under way. Nimans is our largest UK acquisition for some time and it will keep the local team busy for a while." ■

previous experience has helped particularly with our acquisition programme over the years," he added. "I also believe that as an adviser you are selling expertise and service. This is the case with Midwich: We may sell products but we are successful because of how we support our customers and vendors."

Fenby became Managing Director in 2010 and the company floated in 2016. The IPO gave the group a higher profile and credibility in the market in addition to capital for expansion. It also provided the ability to use meaningful

Colt's inclusive mission

Colt CEO Keri Gilder's ability to move culture change mountains was recognised by her recent appointment as Global President of the Global Telecom Women's Network. Here, she shares insights into Colt's impressive diversity and inclusion journey and how she is advancing a global all inclusive people support agenda.



Keri Gilder

Everyday inclusion and support for all Colt staff globally, no matter how diverse their backgrounds, is Gilder's mission. Not surprisingly, her staff support agenda was, in part, shaped by the past two years. "The pandemic has shown that mental health is just as important as physical health," said Gilder. "You need a healthy workforce, mentally and physically, to have a healthy business. Employees that are clear on what's expected of them, understand the vision and plans for the business, and have, where possible, autonomy and flexibility in their working practices are more likely to be engaged and have a positive outlook."

Colt has over 60 qualified Mental Health First Aiders (MFHAs) across the business globally who have been trained to be the first response for colleagues who need a listening ear or signposting to further

support. Early detection of a poor state of mind is key, and Gilder called for the education of managers and employees on the signs of deteriorating mental health through specific training or webinars. "Early warning signs are hard to see in ourselves, so it can help to have colleagues connect our behaviours to our mental health," she added.

This is why Colt introduced its global Employee Assistance Programme. It provides staff and their families with confidential support, resources and information for personal and work-life issues. It's offered free of charge and is available 24/7. Furthermore, Colt's LGBTQ+ and Allies network aims to create a safe space for all LGBTQ+ employees and allies, raise awareness of issues that impact LGBTQ+ employees and encourage diversity and inclusion. Colt also makes adjustments for staff with physical or

mobility issues to cater for colleagues of all abilities. "We're conscious that not all conditions are visible and that we must provide support for them too," said Gilder.

Strong progress

Colt has also made strong progress in another area that is too often overlooked – the 'sandwich' generation of people who left work to bring up children. "We're welcoming them back in increasing numbers and getting the benefit of their experiences and wisdom," commented Gilder. "We spend a lot of time focusing on the lost generation of women – and for that matter men – who have left our sector and can't see an obvious way back in. With women, that's often been to raise children or care for sick family members and we need to make them aware that we're hiring.

"We want to capitalise on the life skills and experience

they can bring to us. A career shouldn't jolt to a stop just because there has been an interruption. Investing time in getting returners up to speed on the latest tools we use – such as Microsoft Teams – has yielded great results.

"The knowledge and skills returners have collected from before their career breaks means they add value fast. Our original plan in September 2020 was to recruit six people and we ended up with 11. We've since extended the programme to India."

Returners to work (like all candidates) will also benefit from Colt's approach to addressing unconscious bias. "We host unconscious bias awareness sessions because if we can unpick that in our hiring and across our company – and by extension, across society – then we go a long way forward," commented Gilder. "The more we peel away innate

prejudices or assumptions then the better we do."

Gilder also chairs the TM Forum's Diversity & Inclusion Council and is deeply embroiled in how the technology industry can take practical actions to drive new ways of thinking and behaviours. She believes that by sharing successes and learnings with other companies across the world the whole industry can move forward. "If we learn from each other, we move faster and work smarter," she commented. "I'm now building support for a DPS – Diversity Promotion Score – as an industry key performance indicator. Change cannot happen in isolation. It has to filter across the ecosystems of partners and suppliers, to then filter across the whole industry sector, then disseminate across business more broadly and into society as a whole to drive tangible and beneficial change and give everyone an equal voice."

Colt celebrates milestones such as International Women's Day on March 8th when it hosted network meetings with colleagues and business partners around the world, sharing knowledge, understanding differences and sharing its messages across the global village of social media. "Some of our inclusiveness work includes the programmes run by Network 25, our women's network," noted Gilder. "This encourages greater female representation and successes, as well as seminars and informal meetings. We survey our people, engage with groups and also accept anonymously shared diversity data because we want to hear the truth, unfiltered." ■

Daisy Anywhere busts IoT myth

A power partnership between Daisy and Pangea is set to unlock growth underpinned by intelligent mobile data, and a key part of their strategy is to help partners look beyond traditional perceptions of IoT and harness Daisy Anywhere, a new way of thinking about connectivity that is certain to make you think twice about IoT. "There is a misconception that IoT simply transfers small packets of data, which made it difficult to crystallise the real opportunity," said Julien Parven, Director of Daisy Partner Business. "But the Daisy Anywhere concept productises the vast intelligent mobile data opportunity."

Pangea Sales Director Bernie McPhillips noted that



Julien Parven

intelligent mobile data can be applied to many different use cases. "That's due to the nature of the investment Pangea has made in its core infrastructure," he said. "We're effectively plugged into the mobile networks, we have a presence in five UK data centres and that data comes into our private network. So we have far more control than you'd get from a typical mobile broadband service."

McPhillips says Pangea 'can do clever things' such as build applications into its



Bernie McPhillips

core network, like dynamic content filtering at network level. It can also assign true public or private static IPs at network level. SIM cards can go in any device and have a static IP which is often critical when connecting payment terminals and CCTV cameras for example. "When providing Internet with hosted telephony you need a static IP on the SIM," added McPhillips. "These are examples of why intelligent mobile data is different."

Parven explained that the complexity around intelligent

mobile data resides only at network level. "My message to partners is that everything is taken care of for them," he said. "It's about being able to identify the array of opportunities that exist for intelligent mobile data and crystallising them into a proposition for customers."

McPhillips also emphasised that the myth of tiny packets of data and having to do massive volumes to make money is a thing of the past. "Now, we have high data bandwidth applications like CCTV or we can provide intelligent mobile data solutions to deliver Internet where fibre isn't available," he added. "A 4G/5G SIM will get the customer up and running tomorrow. And when the fibre goes live, turn it down to back-up."

On this point Parven added: "We all know the challenges around the deployment of some services, leased lines in particular. This reduces the lead to cash timeline and radically improves the customer experience."

According to McPhillips, 'there's some incredible high bandwidth applications out there'. "We're connecting ferries, trains, two of the biggest global airlines as well as huge logistical organisations with over 4,500 vehicles," he stated. "These customers are using terabytes of data. Old ideas of low data, tiny packets, no money in it – it's all a myth. There is money to be made with good margins and long contracts, high ARPUs and low maintenance."

See page 34



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Pick up on the Signals

The Worshipful Company of Information Technologists (WCIT) is helping to ensure resettling Royal Signals personnel are ready to fill skills gaps and transition to successful careers in the ICT and telecoms industry.

The WCIT has been working with the Royal Corps of Signals, the Army's ICT specialists, on professional development and career transition support since the genesis of their partnership in 1992. Transition events have been run at the Signals' headquarters in Blandford Forum, Dorset, and via Zoom during the pandemic, to help resettling military personnel of all rank and length of service to understand the value they can bring to commercial roles and learn skills that will aid employment.

With the current and ongoing skills shortages in the ICT industry, ex-Army personnel might be the perfect solution for channel organisations seeking to employ hardworking, loyal and disciplined staff with technical know-how and used to working under intense pressure. "If you join the Army from school you've probably never done a job interview, you've probably never written a CV, you've probably never thought about your support needs and all of those things need resetting," said Andrew Parsons, Project

Manager for Royal Signals Engagement, who was a Royal Signals officer until 2012. He took advantage of the WCIT resettling process and subsequently joined the Livery Company and is now a Liveryman and mentor in the programme.

"I found the resettlement process immensely valuable," he added. "When you've done 24 years in the Army, your language, your view of the world and your view of yourself may not be in the right framework to gain civilian employment and start a life outside of the service."

Steve Smith, Court Assistant at the WCIT and the founder of Astro Technology Group, is a vocal supporter of the process. "What we do in our transition events is translate the skillsets that these incredible people have into the civilian equivalents. We let them understand what their worth is and what the roles and opportunities are out there."

The WCIT day-long events are split into two halves. In the morning group sessions practical help is provided such as 'writing a killer CV' or 'how to nail the interview'.



The incredible values and standards most armed forces personnel take into the civilian world has immense worth.

In the afternoon, delegates are paired with a mentor to understand where they are on their journey and what their needs are. These mentors then follow up as regularly as the delegates need counsel. Parsons added: "The mentor is not there to offer deep advice or tell them what to do, it is about the individual making their own decision, steered by a mentor."

True worth

A significant part of the process is ensuring that ex-military personnel are not underselling themselves or being taken advantage of by employers. Smith commented: "People coming out of the military often don't appreciate their worth. The incredible values and standards that most armed forces personnel take into the civilian world has immense worth."

Smith believes these values and standards are ideal for most employers, and this is particularly pertinent at a time when companies are struggling to find and retain the right people. "I have a track record of employing ex-military people and they are both absolutely dependable and incredibly hard working," he added. "They have all shaped the business over the time they have been with us."

The WCIT is currently working with the Institute of Telecoms Professionals and other institutions on a programme which will focus on retention rather than transition, looking at keeping staff on for longer. "If you spend a lot of money training people in the Royal Signals and then they leave after five or six years, then it's a significant loss," added Smith. "Our Professional

Horizons programme is about enabling people that are still serving in the Royal Signals to see how their career path aligns in with a civilian career path. Many leave the service prematurely because they think the grass is greener and often end up regretting it." ■

- The WCIT also supports TechVets which has a job board and approximately 5,500 veterans on their membership. TechVets empowers British Armed Forces veterans, service leavers, reservists and their families to retrain, upskill and successfully break into information technology careers. For further information please visit <https://techvets.co>

- To find out more about how you could bring resettling Royal Signals personnel into your business please visit www.wcit.org.uk

“There is no security on this earth; there is only opportunity”

Douglas MacArthur

Since my last StayPrivate column, a Great Power struggle has erupted, war looms in continental Europe, millions of citizens are displaced, the airwaves are thick with ghoulish forecasts about the cost-of-living crisis, we have a Sunak Spring Statement selling tax reductions whilst the opposite unfolds, and smooth-talking lawyers deftly avoid hard questions while pleading no, not them, they never worked for any Russians, only for those unfortunate wives, mistresses or business partners.

We are warned to be on the guard for increased hacks and cyber threats. My bank writes to me by email telling me not to trust any emails from the bank and that I should be aware that my wealth manager may be a Russian bot. For all the good he has done me I could be forgiven thinking he was in the employ of a foreign state, not an FCA-regulated Bank!

Back to the desk, we see Meta fined for GDPR breaches alongside more stories of ransomware attacks. But whilst the renewed focus on cyber threats and fines is welcome, I still see customers unsure as to what they could or should do.

As General MacArthur noted, we must be on the front foot, seizing the initiative and IMHO if we aren't, then someone else will be and they may not be friendly. I find myself using new phrases in meetings with clients, 'cyber hygiene', 'data security', 'GDPR compliance' – which makes the flow of conversation quite difficult if you are anything like me and want clients to like you!

Perhaps we should help ourselves and our clients, let our marketing tell the story and automate sales processes as much as possible. Good margins are great, but we need volumes too. So here are some useful facts which may help you on your way: in 2021, the average UK Ransomware attack cost a larger company £130,000 and a smaller company between £8500 and £13500 (UK Cyber Security Breaches, 2021). Emails to and from personal email accounts are involved in nearly all (over 70%) of breaches and 39% of UK Respondents to HMG's Cyber Security Breaches' attacks in 2021's survey reported an attack – that's four in ten clients.

At StayPrivate, we're always available to help, so contact us directly or via your distributor such as Zest4.

Perhaps we should help ourselves and our clients, let our marketing tell the story and automate sales processes as much as possible.



Adrian Barnard

For more information visit www.stayprivate.com

Brushing up on the legal implications of hybrid working

Paul Kelly, Head of Employment Law at Blacks Solicitors, discusses employment law as it currently relates to staff wellbeing and the evolving hybrid workplace.

Under the current legislation employees with 26 weeks service have the right to request (but not the right to be granted) flexible working arrangements. Employers can refuse a request to change contractual terms with reference to eight broad business reasons set out in the legislation. If an employee has made a request an employer should ask for it in writing, consider the request fairly, discuss it with the employee and look at other options if the request isn't possible. A decision must be given to the employee within three months of receiving the request. A flexible working request can only be turned down if there's a valid and factual business reason or if there will be a negative effect on the quality of work.

If an employer decides that monitoring is necessary they should undertake a data privacy impact assessment. This, essentially, is a balancing act to ensure that employees enjoy privacy at work while still protecting the business's interests.

If a data privacy impact assessment is undertaken properly then employers do not generally need their employees' express consent, although it is advised. Express consent will be needed if the employer is collecting



Paul Kelly

sensitive data about the employee. It is also highly recommended that employers implement an electronic communications policy to clearly set out the standards they expect from employees.

Monitoring dos and don'ts

This should include a full statement setting out why monitoring is to be undertaken and for what purposes, together with how the employer intends to monitor employees and to what extent. The employer should also clearly state who will have access to any of the data collected from the monitoring undertaken and how it will be processed.

Perhaps the most contentious issues we foresee for employers relate to the recall of staff into the workplace. Some employees have become used to working from home and, confident that they can do their job remotely, have no desire to return to the

workplace. In this situation employers would be best advised to engage with the employee's objections before simply demanding that they get back to work. If no accommodation can be achieved and there is nothing preventing the employee from returning to work, then disciplinary action for failure to follow a reasonable instruction may be an option.

Some employees, especially the clinically vulnerable, will still not feel safe returning to work. This situation must be handled with care because employees have a legal right not to be subjected to a detriment if they remove themselves from the workplace when they reasonably perceive serious danger associated with remaining there.

In such a circumstance the employer needs to satisfy itself that it has discharged its duty of care and that its premises are Covid-secure to allay the concerns of the employee in question. If this still does not satisfy the employee and they simply refuse to return, then termination of the contract of employment can be considered. However, this is not a step to be taken lightly as any dismissal related to an employee's health and safety concerns will almost certainly invite a claim in the employment tribunal. ■

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How leadership adapts

Following the Covid-19 pandemic, business leaders are tasked with a set of challenges and opportunities not faced before. Here, Agilitas CEO Shaun Lynn discusses the issues that he believes are becoming increasingly important for leaders to navigate.

The major business issues in today's world will no doubt remain just as important in the future, therefore a long-term strategic rethink has been the order of the day. "Today's leaders need to be clear in their vision and communication," stated Lynn. "They need to be consistent in layering the message to reassure; they need to be leading by example in the thick of the action; and they need to be honest – no one has a monopoly on the right answer."

The challenges that many business leaders have faced over the past two years are truly unprecedented, noted Lynn, but the experience can be beneficial. "It can only make you a more rounded and thoughtful person, which can be a benefit to you as a leader," he said. "The main challenges most leaders are facing today are a lack of resource and access to talent, inflation, variable market demand, working capital pressures and supply chain shortages, to name a few. These are once

in a generation challenges that no text book tells you how to navigate."

Despite Covid-19, Agilitas expanded its facilities and headcount. It opened new logistics hubs and centres of excellence in a non-traditional way, as well as expanding its workforce by up to 60 per cent. "We've had to change our recruitment model, induct staff remotely and develop a knowledge transfer programme," added Lynn. "This is totally different to how we worked prior to Covid. Yet our business has doubled in size during the pandemic and continues to grow."

During the past two years Agilitas also doubled its revenues and more than doubled its EBITDA, leading to a secondary management buyout (SBO). Furthermore, the company attracted significant external investment. "There were many factors to the success of these developments – a clear vision and strategy, a momentum that existed pre-Covid, increased demand for



Shaun Lynn

services and the ability to leverage and aggregate assets for customers' benefit," said Lynn. "Ultimately, the

we offer, which intensified during Covid, to making sure we keep communicating with our staff and customers. We

Ultimately, the biggest learning point during Covid was that people buy from people in all senses

biggest learning point during Covid was that people buy from people in all senses."

Growth drivers

As mentioned, Agilitas' growth is in part attributable to pre-Covid trends and momentum, but these are not the only drivers. "Covid has made everyone question what they do and why they do it," added Lynn. "We learnt a number of lessons, ranging from the extent of demand for the services that

reviewed our operation and offerings and sought to focus on the core where we add most value. Our priorities are largely focused on managing growth and ensuring that the quality of our services, operations and people are in line with our customers' expectations. We are also focused on understanding who and why our next 30 tier 1 customers will be."

According to Lynn, the lasting legacy of Covid will

be for annuity revenues and quality of earnings to be far more prevalent in the IT and communications sector. Not least because the shortage of products and constraints on supply chains are prompting people to think about services more than ever before.

"Those that currently deliver services are questioning whether they are sub-scale and better off partnering with the businesses that have flourished during Covid, namely the as-a-service, born in the cloud generation that is far more agile," commented Lynn.

"Another positive aspect of the pandemic is that most businesses spend far less time worrying and thinking about what their competition is doing, and are now far more focused on their own purpose and what they are going to do over the longer term. In this context, those businesses that really understand their employees and develop the right connections and culture will be the ultimate winners."

The key to long-term success also resides in harnessing inspiration, believes Lynn. "Inspiration is all around us most of the time – the challenge many of us have is to open our eyes to it," he commented. "I've been inspired by many things: How people adapted to remote working, how they supported one another with remote social activities, and how the fear most of us felt for our businesses, families and friends turned into hope. None of us now will ever take for granted the time we spend in person with family, friends and loved ones, or going on vacation and sharing new experiences." ■



CHANNEL CHAMPIONS

7th July 2022, Regents Park

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May 5th

Still time to recognise your amazing teams

Channel Champions will return to Regent's Park, London on July 7th 2022 to celebrate the brilliant teams that have performed miracles over the course of another challenging year.

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Channel Champions offers a unique promotional opportunity to associate your organisation with high achievers. And we have made entering simple and easy to do. Just register on the awards website www.channel-champions.com, which will enable you to view all the categories and download the entry forms. The entry deadline is May 5th, 2022, so there's plenty of time to enter. If you are shortlisted, you will then join other finalists who will gather at a celebratory summer garden party with the awards ceremony staged in an open marquee followed by networking in the glorious surroundings of London's most elegant Royal Park.

Terry O'Brien, CEO of Channel Champions headline sponsor DWS, commented: "We



Terry O'Brien

delighted to play our part in paying tribute to the amazing professionals in our fantastic industry. Staging Channel Champions in the open air with a festival atmosphere makes this an event to remember.

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

Event sponsors already lined up for Channel Champions are CityFibre, Evolve IP, Gamma, NFON, Union Street, Virtual1 and Voiceflex.

Vincent Disneur, Managing Director of Union



Street commented "Effective billing is essential to customer satisfaction, experience, and retention. In an industry where margins are continuously under pressure, billing and finance teams also have a huge part to play in the viability and prosperity of channel businesses. It's only right that their hard work and dedication should be recognised and celebrated, so it's a great honour for Union Street to sponsor this year's billing and finance categories.

Best of luck to all this year's entrants! Channel Champions is a fantastic event that never fails to deliver, and we look forward to seeing our friends and colleagues there on the big day."

Paul Taylor, Sales Director at Voiceflex, commented: "The last two years has been a truly tough time for people in channel businesses across the UK, who have responded magnificently to the challenges presented to them by delivering outstanding products, services and solutions. We are therefore absolutely delighted to be sponsoring Channel Champions, an event that recognises the hard work, dedication, and commitment they have shown. We look forward to this fantastic opportunity to say thank you and celebrate the achievements of our valued teams. We wish everyone the very best of luck and see you in July."

To enter go to www.channel-champions.com

Eclipse set for starring r

Cross-sector collaboration to increase the comms sector's true value within a channel-first and full fibre context will reap significant benefits for partners, according to Eclipse Wholesale Managing Director James Drake.

Following a 12 month sabbatical Drake established Eclipse in 2004 with a vision to at last liberate underperforming resellers from the constraints of what he saw were counter productive supplier relationships – an observation that he says is as true today as back then. “Some channel partners have lost interest in our industry due to poor levels of service or being incorrectly informed about the delivery of products and services,” stated Drake. “A price list and access to a supplier portal are no longer enough and many suppliers could be doing a better job. The main challenge for us is how to reach these partners and demonstrate the service we want to offer.”

Eclipse Wholesale is emerging as a contender among the comms channel's top providers, steeped in the conviction that being channel-only is a distinct advantage as it seeks to become the leading supplier to small and medium channel partners. According to Drake, Eclipse's model is efficient and scalable and its targets for this year and next are significant compared to previous years. “We want to consistently add new channel partners every month,” he added. “The room for growth is exciting but will require focus and hard work, plus getting our name in front of the partners who need us most.”



James Drake

The thought of solving someone's business issues with technology still gets me into the office every morning

Having harnessed his strategy to the cause of partners, Drake effectively repositioned the business as having its roots in channel territory. It's this, and his go-to-market strategy, that Drake says holds the key to long-term success. “The turning point was our decision to go channel-first and move away from direct sales,” he added.

Eclipse began its commercial life as a reseller when Drake decided during his sabbatical not to become a solicitor, instead reverting to the comms sector which he first entered via an apprenticeship at Kingston Communications as a Trainee Technician after leaving school in 1991. He moved to Canon in 1997 and then

to Easi-tel in 1999. It was a call for help from a former large retail customer that tugged at Drake's instinct to assist during his year out.

Up and running

“Things moved quickly after I decided we could supply the services the customer wanted better than their incumbent,” he explained.

“The thought of solving someone's business issues with technology still gets me into the office every morning. Over the last 20 years we have sold many products via different sales channels. However, our focus is now firmly on channel-first.”

Drake's strategic outlook is not complicated, nor is

role in channel

Eclipse's portfolio proposition of connectivity and mobile solutions. "We expect these two strands to continue to grow," he noted. "The pandemic has placed demands on ISPs to deliver more bandwidth and bigger networks that cater for greater quantities of data usage on their networks. This trend will require Eclipse to sell more connectivity to our customers, offering alternative and resilient networks with access to bigger bearers."

Converging trends

The activities of altnets highlight the way powerful channel relationships, new technology and revolutionary industry changes intertwine, despite the roadblocks. "The altnets bring a fantastic opportunity for us all," he said. "They are providing crucial access in geographical areas previously untouched. The WLR switch-off and a full fibre future are driving our approach, engagement and strategy. But the industry has much work to do in helping customers move to a full fibre product set. The roll out of FTTP is far too slow. We still see customers who can only get ADSL. We need to use all the tools available to us as resellers to deliver the best solution now and for the longer-term. This could be a combination of 5G, broadband and Ethernet, for example. Furthermore, I see IoT as a huge area for future growth."

Drake also believes that much debate in the industry should be centred around whether the sector should take collective action on increasing its inherent value. "The cost of connectivity will continue to decline and the whole supply chain

needs to be managed to maintain competitiveness and margin," he said. "I'd like to see the channel have a conversation about raising costs in our industry. The 'great resignation' has had an impact on recruitment and the costs of employment. Interest rates continue to rise to combat inflation and overheads are increasing in line with global pressures. The big challenges are margin, market consolidation and customer apathy. The market is almost over supplied and customers have so much choice. This is driving down margin. The same can be said for market consolidation as national suppliers try to upscale local opportunities.

"The value is now in the hands of the reseller and time is always of the essence – quotes, products and services need to be delivered expediently to match customer expectations. Professional and managed services may become converged into a single agreement as the costs of those services reduce. Delivering both the services and the professional management will offer an advantageous position."

Drake's big vision for his own business is also a declaration of strong intent and will surely send ripples across the industry. "I see Eclipse Wholesale as the number one channel aggregator to the small and medium partner channel," commented Drake. "We hope to achieve this strategic goal by spreading the Eclipse Wholesale message, our desire to help, eulogising about the benefits of a full fibre future and working damn hard to make sure it happens." ■

Just a minute with James Drake...

Role model: My Dad: A creative free spirit who lived life to the full in an era of limited opportunities. I hope to honour his memory with an online collection of his artwork.

Your biggest fear? Spiders.

Best advice you have been given? My Dad (who was a joiner on building sites) told me... find a role where you can use your brain instead of your hands and your workspace is indoors.

In hindsight: I would have gone all-in earlier with the cutting edge technology we have seen become mainstream.

Tell us something about yourself we don't know: I spent my 40th birthday weekend learning to sail a dinghy, passing my RYA level 1 and 2, following a bet with my wife that I could learn to sail. I have never sailed since.

Industry bugbear: Number porting: With millions of numbers to be moved to VoIP before the WLR switch off I would like to see a simpler, more efficient process.

One example of something you have overcome: I fractured my spine in my early 20s and had to manage my physical health ever since. Yet I've completed the Great North Run more than a dozen times and raised thousands for charity.

How would you like to be remembered? A great friend or formidable enemy, but with the same terrible jokes regardless.

Your main strength and what could you work on? Resourcefulness, prudence and tenacity. But I could work on my patience.

Top tip for resellers: At your next supplier meeting ask what more you could be doing together to create more value.

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Full fibre: A sector in need

Strategic gaps, unwanted legalities and near total fragmentation highlight the immature nature of a full fibre sector that nevertheless asserts supremacy over legacy networks and resides at the centre of a communications revolution. In the second of this year's Channel Forecast Insight Sessions, Andrew Wilson, Head of Wholesale and Carrier at CityFibre, and NextGenAccess Sales Director Steve Mackervoy unravel the impacts of an immature fibre market and offer solutions that would hasten, and capitalise on, the migration to Digital Britain.

Full fibre is shifting the comms sector's tectonic plates yet key points raised by Wilson and Mackervoy speak of a sector in need of greater maturity and development. A step in the right direction is a potential new plank in CityFibre's strategy, which is in the early stages of development and could ultimately speed up its full fibre roll out across regions beyond its current reach – and shows one sign of a sector coming of age. The key issue for CityFibre is whether to continue going solo or collaborate, because working with like-minded altnets certainly seems sensible given the challenges.

"Altnets are on their own missions," stated Wilson. "That creates competition and agitates the marketplace, but no one partner can do this on their own. The altnet market is immature and could do better at working with each other. We all have a collective end goal to make sure we support the UK digital landscape. So CityFibre is starting to have conversations with altnets to see whether we can work together reciprocally and add

to our footprint in regions we aren't working in, or in areas that are synergistic to where we have a presence. It's early days, but those types of commercial conversations will evolve this year."

The impact of a relatively immature full fibre market is a real challenge to the sector with consequent implications for its readiness to meet Openreach's copper switch off deadline. "Individual players are on track," said Mackervoy. "But across the country we are behind the curve. Recently, Openreach talked about 80 per cent coverage by 2026. This shows that the market isn't moving as fast as it needs to. If there was more collaboration we'd have a stronger voice with Government to get things changed and also make sure fibre tax doesn't come in. Our individual voices are not loud and not heard. We'd be listened to speaking as a group."

Full fibre signifies perhaps the most prominent example of a sector undergoing a revolution. But the view that something is systematically wrong with the wayleave process has long been



Andrew Wilson

The altnet market is immature and could do better at working with each other. We all have a collective end goal to make sure we support the UK digital landscape

widespread among those impacted by this obstacle to growth. Mackervoy believes that for landlords and lawyers, wayleaves are no more than a lucrative aspect of the full fibre gravy train. "Key to growth is resolving the wayleave headache," he added. "In terms of access it's a big cost. Many landlords and lawyers see it as an opportunity to

make money. Solving that process would make life much easier, especially in multi-tenanted buildings.

Access matters

"I would like to see a process whereby we gain access to a building and once inside we can serve multiple customers. People would then see price changes because providers have to factor in the cost

of wayleaves into a build programme which could be a massive percentage of the overall build. If you can get that down, prices may start falling and catalyse more take-up. But we're held hostage by landlords and solicitors to get complicated wayleaves done."

Wayleaves and siloed altnets are two symptoms of a

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d of accelerated maturity

sector in need of evolution. Another is infrastructure capacity. "We need to free up space in the ducts where we deploy in city centres," added Mackervoy. "You find congested areas and a lot of space is taken up by copper. We need copper to be recovered at the same time as the fibre roll out to give us more space and speed up deployment."

Mackervoy's focus over the next year will be on London before expanding into other areas such as Bristol, Leeds, Birmingham, as well as Manchester and Liverpool where NextGenAccess has already completed projects. "We're not so much worried about end user contact, we're about making sure the network gets used after we've built it," he added.

Mackervoy is primarily focused on working with fibre providers rather than recruiting resellers, and NextGenAccess seeks an equilibrium between premises passed and actual connections. Against this backdrop, Wilson says that one of the biggest challenges for partners is knowing where they can buy fibre products. He commented: "Do resellers know which of their customers can move to a fibre network? That's the key to this. At the moment there are pockets of areas where you can get full fibre, and many other areas where build programmes haven't started.

"We promote our build programme, work with local authorities and councils to make sure they understand what we're doing and why. Then we create an environment where we have ISPs that can serve locally or

on a national basis. We make people aware at a consumer level that we are there."

Wilson explained that CityFibre conducts a three-pronged approach to the market – build, fill and thrill. "The build programme is fully in flight," he said "We've passed over one million premises and I see that number ticking up rapidly over the coming months. My role is to fill: As we pass those premises we need to convert them into customers. So our priority is to enable the channel and give them the products and services to win across all parts of the business market, with the tools and automation to make the process seamless and low touch. It's about partner enablement."

At this point the experts diverge. Mackervoy's priority is to build, but his focus is on the back end rather than enabling resellers. "We've got innovative ideas for the channel," he commented. "Instead of having to consume a lit fibre service predominantly from Openreach we offer dark fibre alternatives, giving the customer the experience they want. We want to work with wholesale providers, sit in the background on their portals and help them build their own product with dark fibre as one of the elements of that product stack. They can leverage their own core network skills to deliver the products they want for the customer.

"A separate objective is to make sure we get access where we are building, otherwise you end up with motorways running past buildings with no way to connect into them. Ever



Steve Mackervoy

Our individual voices are not loud and not necessarily heard. We'd be listened to speaking as a group

since I've been in telecoms, access has been the limiting factor. It's the most expensive element and the most difficult and longest to install. That's what holds the market back most. Our focus is to make sure those access products are right."

Wholesale strategy

According to Mackervoy, another driver that will accelerate the take up of fibre is for altnets not to seek customer ownership, but to embrace the wholesale model. "Some fibre providers are interested in building the infrastructure and owning the customer relationship, with wholesale an afterthought," he stated. "If more companies saw wholesale as important they'd get to leverage their assets much more quickly, even though they would not necessarily own the customer connection. Some altnet ISPs will continue to operate in silos. The market needs a kick

start to make partnerships happen quicker."

Go-to-market strategies are an important point, concurred Wilson. "I see quite a few alternative network providers pivot their market strategy," he added. "Not having a wholesale angle, or even a business one, shows they are going purely consumer. A wholesale and business strategy will help them to maximise the opportunity and penetration better."

Altnets deserve a medal for defying many of the challenges of a new and developing market, but some full fibre providers must wake up to the uncomfortable fact that much more needs to be done to attack the market head on, believes Mackervoy. "It seems everyone started on a journey based around premises passed without considering how many connections you achieve,"

he observed. "Converting people to full fibre has been more challenging than expected. Competition drives this. If multiple providers hit the market with different messages at different times adoption will grow quicker. This is why people need to take the wholesale approach so that everyone can buy network from everyone else. And we all need to build to the same standards and shout with one voice."

Such a constructive outcome would radically revise the current modus operandi of many altnets, and focus the debate on hastening the sector's maturity. "Individual organisations do their own thing," added Wilson. "They'll have distinct routes to market and their own IT and system stacks, which means when we are looking at working with each other it will be more difficult if we are all talking a different language. CityFibre paved the way for many altnets and we are keen to make sure that as an industry we continue that charge and support each other."

2025 and the promise of an all-digital future is also concentrating minds, and the ultimate message being sent by our panelists is one of opportunity. "CityFibre had the vision and mission before 2025 was even announced," added Wilson. "2025 does however accelerate the opportunity for the channel, therefore we need to make sure we have the infrastructure to move people onto fibre. We're currently across 285 towns and cities which accounts for circa 30 per cent of the UK. My conversations with other altnets show that they are accelerating at pace too." ■

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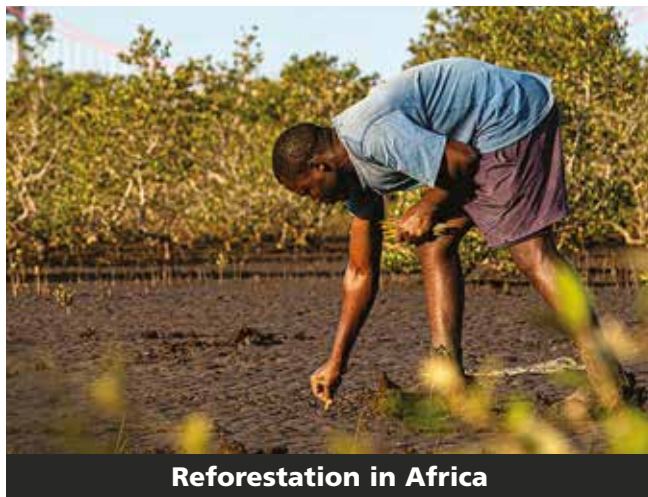
Let's work together to plant trees and reduce carbon emissions

Understandably, recent world events have taken climate change off the front pages of newspapers and news websites, but this cannot mean that global efforts to halt global mean temperature increase should cease.

Readers of this ongoing series of climate change features will know that Environmental, Social and Corporate Governance (ESG) is at the forefront of the minds of industry leaders, and every Information and Communications Technology (ICT) organisation should be joining efforts to reduce emissions to as close to zero as possible.

The UK Government's Net Zero Strategy report points to one of the most recent reports from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), stating that "if we fail to limit global warming to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels, the floods and fires we have seen around the world this year will get more frequent and more fierce, crops will be more likely to fail, and sea levels will rise driving mass migration as millions are forced from their homes. Above 1.5°C we risk reaching climatic tipping points like the melting of arctic permafrost – releasing millennia of stored greenhouse gases – meaning we could lose control of our climate for good".

The ability of trees to capture and store carbon dioxide has long made them a valuable tool in the fight against rising global temperatures, and



Reforestation in Africa

preserving and enhancing the world's tree habitats remains an important climate change solution that we can support right now.

Tree planting is an action we can take now to build a better future. Fortunately, for people who are unsure of where to start when it comes to funding tree planting projects and other types of climate impact projects, organisations exist which are helping individuals and businesses to easily make a positive impact on the climate. Leading the charge is Ecologi, a monthly subscription service which enables individuals and companies to have a positive impact on the planet, by funding the planting of trees (which they can see growing in their own personal virtual forest!), and by supporting verified carbon

reduction projects, as well as setting goals for a more eco-conscious lifestyle.

Ecologi started in early 2019, when co-founder Elliot Coad was on his morning commute to work. When buying his morning coffee, he began to wonder how much climate action could be funded with that same amount of money. The answer led to a revelation – the pocket change that billions of us have would not only be a significant upgrade to our own personal contributions to the climate crisis but also that, one day, it could potentially account for reducing half of the world's emissions.

To date, Ecologi's community has funded the planting of over 37.5 million trees and has also reduced over 1.5 million tonnes of carbon

through verified carbon reduction projects.

The company proposes that since people subscribe to monthly music-streaming services, why wouldn't they subscribe to monthly climate impact too? Ecologi's subscription service is now used by 35,000 individuals and businesses. The money Ecologi receives from the community is used to plant trees (currently at a rate of around one million trees every 10 days) in high quality tree planting projects all over the world, and it's also used to retire carbon credits from a wide range of verified carbon reduction projects, preventing carbon emissions from entering the atmosphere.

Becoming an Ecologi 'Climate Positive Workforce' is an easy way for ICT companies to start their sustainability journey because it doesn't require the business to have already calculated the size of their carbon footprint.

"We have done the hard work and calculated an average footprint for someone in the UK, so by becoming a Climate Positive Workforce, the business will be more than offsetting the professional and personal carbon footprints of their team members," said Linda



The cost of Ecologi's lowest subscription increased to £10.70 per person from the end of March in line with increased prices in the carbon market. However, Comms Dealer readers that sign up before the end of April will receive one month's subscription for one individual free of charge and will also be able to take advantage of the previous £5.20 monthly price, leading the way for other companies in our industry to follow suit.

Go to <https://ecologi.com/business/checkout> quoting Commsdealeroffer

Adams, Head of Partnerships.

Monthly subscriptions start from just £10.70 per person - the equivalent of about four cappuccinos - and you can opt to fund more climate impact for your employees who have a higher footprint - for example, those who travel internationally for work.

Subscribers can now also support tree planting in the UK by funding a new UK tree each month for an extra £4.45 a month. The best part about UK trees? The funder can see a photo of the tree they've funded, as well as its species and What3Words location!

<https://ecologi.com/collective-action>

Action Takers

Zen charts woodland path towards green carbon sink

Zen Internet is proactively reducing carbon emissions as part of a wide-ranging environmental strategy. Here, CEO Paul Stobart explains what actions his company is taking, including plans to create a 'Zen forest'.

Reducing emissions is quite simply the right thing to do and fits with our values as a certified B Corp. We have chosen to align ourselves to the Science Based Targets initiative (SBTi) pathway to Net Zero, involving the setting of a near term milestone to reduce emissions by 50% by 2030, and a long-term milestone to reduce emissions by 90% by 2040. Our current emissions are around 18,500 tonnes of CO₂, so by 2040 we will have residual emissions of up to 1,850 tonnes to offset.

There are multiple ways to fulfil one's carbon offsetting obligations. A simple choice is through the purchase of carbon credits – a kind of 'top up' scheme if you like – but this is likely to be very expensive by 2040. The other option is to act now, by investing in schemes that actively remove CO₂ and, in parallel, help to build a healthier, more sustainable planet.

There are many types of carbon removal project: some are 'natural' such as woodland creation, agricultural soil management, peat and marshland restoration, or seaweed cultivation; and some are more technical, such as direct carbon capture or biomass energy carbon capture and storage.

One idea we are actively considering at Zen is woodland creation. Internally, we call this the 'Zen Forest' concept. The idea is to buy land and develop a biodiverse woodland, and to enjoy the forest as it matures into a true carbon 'sink' (a natural environment that absorbs more carbon than it emits). Fortunately, there are organisations out there who can help, like Forestry England.

This is how it would work: We acquire suitable land and form a close working partnership with Forestry England. We lease the land to Forestry England who then create the woodland by planting (a lot of) trees, using Government funding in the main. Forestry England then manages the forest in

partnership with us, providing a lasting legacy – an outdoor environment to be enjoyed by our people and the local community for many years to come



Paul Stobart

– with an important carbon reduction role to play. Based on a 50-hectare forest, we would expect to capture around 320 tonnes of carbon per year, short of our 1,850-tonne target but, combined with other schemes, an important contribution to that final 10% carbon offset.

Jim Lee, Head of Woodland Creation at Forestry England, said: "I'm delighted that The Forestry England Woodland Partnership is being considered by Zen as a route to woodland creation. We are looking for partners who share our values and our sense of urgency in responding to the climate and nature crisis by providing woodlands for communities to enjoy."

There is nothing stopping smaller businesses banding together in a collaborative effort to invest in a woodland creation – good for the community, good for the environment, and good for business!

Action Leaders

**Sarah Bailey –
Bluegrass Group**



Sarah Bailey

Why do you personally believe climate change is an issue everyone in business and the channel should take seriously?

Firstly, if nothing is done, our businesses will suffer, through extreme weather conditions such as flooding and heatwaves. Every business has a crucial role to play in the UK's path to net zero and the channel is no exception. No matter the size of your business, small changes add up to significant changes.

When did you decide to act and what were your first steps?

Following COP26, we knew we needed to start a green initiative and we began looking at potential options. We read lots about the impact of tree planting and felt that was the right way to go for us. We considered both local and global initiatives and decided to partner with MoreTrees.

Why did you decide to work with MoreTrees?

What we loved about More Trees was their partnerships with local communities across the globe. Their tree planting projects have dual benefits, such as poverty alleviation, biodiversity and community support. They're also committed to making it easy for businesses and brands to become greener, with just a click.

How does it work?

You plant trees for £1 a pop. It's all managed within a Dashboard which you get access to as soon as you add some credit to your account. You can then plant trees with a click of a button. You also get access to a 'virtual forest' via a link so you can visibly see and share your progress. Inside the portal there is a default email template which gets sent every time you plant trees on behalf of other people or companies. Or if you want, you can create your own custom email. Recipients then receive a link to a digital certification. You also get access to the member logo which you can add to your website to promote your green stance. Since November 2021 we've planted a total of 310 trees and sequestered 93.00t of CO₂. Not bad for the sake of a few clicks and less than £500.

What benefits does it bring to Bluegrass?

Not only do we have peace of mind that we have started our green journey to support the path to net zero, but we've also actually won a new client because of this initiative! One of our newest clients saw our More Trees initiative on our website homepage and it was the reason he picked up the phone to us, over our competition. It also helps us demonstrate to potential candidates that we care about our planet.

Would you encourage other industry companies to get involved?

Yes, I'd encourage them to set it up today without hesitation. It takes only minutes but can have huge impact both on our fight against climate change, but also positively on our business. If you're looking for a simple but effective green initiative, you've just found one.

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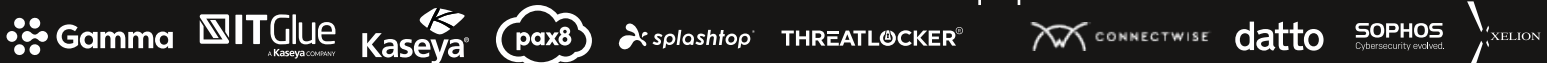
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Conference programme announced!

At the all new XaaS Summit, we'll be pooling our sector experts to deliver a unique blend of content and networking opportunities during the course of one day, with one aim – to help you maximise your managed services capabilities.

Our speaker line up includes:



Camille Mendler, Chief Analyst – Enterprise Services, Omdia

Camille tracks ICT consumption and the shifts influencing CIO and IT Directors today advising many major organisations how best to structure their propositions and go to market. In this session, Camille will share her insights on what is shaping technology buying decisions and highlight the solutions you need to be providing.



Ben Jenkins - Director of Cybersecurity at ThreatLocker.

With over 8 years of experience working within the technology sector, Ben specializes in working with SME's, helping them implement technical solutions that will grow and scale their businesses. As a cybersecurity expert, Ben spends most of his free time educating others about the importance of keeping up-to-date with the latest technologies in order to better protect businesses. In his session, Ben will be looking at "Securing Applications from Vulnerabilities with Zero Trust"



Hamish Taylor – Author, broadcaster and coach

Hamish has helped PWC, British Airways, Proctor & Gamble, Eurotunnel and Sainsbury's Bank put internal and external customers at the heart of their propositions. In his session - The Customer Promise – Hamish will share practical examples and takeaways to help you build greater customer value.



Dave Reynolds - UK Managing Director of Xelion

Dave Reynolds has continuously achieved success on both sides of the channel in the role of supplier and reseller. Dave's first foray in the reseller community came via channel veterans Griffin internet before cementing himself as a go to person to launch and build a hosted voice proposition within a channel business. Dave and his team launched the award winning Xelion communications platform in the UK as an alternative to the traditional hosted voice reseller model.



Mark Lomas - Head of New Business Channel – Gamma
Matt Worboys – Channel Business Development Director – Gamma



In their joint session Mark and Matt will be looking at how resellers can reap rewards from CCaaS, UCaaS and collaboration.



Michael Breeze, EMEA Director of Channel – Pax8

As EMEA Director of Channel at Pax8, Michael drives strategic initiatives to increase its presence within the EMEA IT channel. Michael is responsible for delivering the award-winning Pax8 partner program to new markets, expanding partner enablement programs globally, and building partnerships throughout the IT community. Under his leadership, Pax8 empowers international partners to achieve success with cloud technology through its advanced marketplace of innovative solutions.

There will also be further conference sessions from Datto, Digital Wholesale Solutions, IT Glue, Kaseya, Sophos and Splashtop

This totally new, fully live event is specifically aimed at channel businesses transitioning to service based solutions provision.

A joint initiative by Comms Dealer and IT Europa and staged in the heart of the City of London, this unique one-day confex will provide qualified resellers with a day of inspirational education and exceptional networking.

To secure your place, register now at www.xaas-summit.com

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Optimising intelligent mobile

Evidence that intelligent mobile connectivity has come of age is everywhere to be seen, according to Pangea Managing Director Dan Cunliffe.

That the IoT and intelligent mobile connectivity is the next big growth engine for the channel is clear for all to see, argues Cunliffe. So we put his confidence to the test in the following interview which takes an in-depth look at the IoT ecosystem and how channel partners can capture value from this fast evolving megatrend...

How big is the channel's appetite for intelligent mobile connectivity?

There's a real hunger right now for strategic knowledge in the IoT and mobile data market. It helps when that knowledge translates into clear, tangible, profitable use cases that empower partners. Resellers need to know how they can take a product to their customer base, quickly and easily. MSPs need to see how technology will help them solve problems and win bids. ISPs need to know how a solution integrates with and improves their network. IoT solution providers need to trust that the connectivity is scalable, outage-proof and works in any situation.

Now, partners are coming to us unprompted, asking us how they can get involved. How they can take intelligent mobile connectivity

to their customers. How they can access this new and exciting market.

Where are the biggest opportunities, and what challenges require overcoming to scale these opportunities?

There are three main challenges: The first is finding the opportunities in the first place. But once you know what to look for you see mobile data deals everywhere. And the biggest opportunities are hidden right inside partners' customer bases. That's why we put so much emphasis on training our account managers to analyse those customer bases and to help partners pick up the phone and get the ball rolling.

The second is supplying the right tech which comes down to understanding the customer's use case. What are they out to achieve, and what's the best kind of connectivity for the job? How does it need to be customised to fit the deployment? What protection measures are in place? All this legwork is made easy with the right partner to answer these questions.

And the third challenge is continuing to support the solution long-term. This one's all about making sure it's



Dan Cunliffe

scalable to fit a deployment as it grows in scope, goes international or needs to be repurposed fast. If you build your intelligent mobile data solution to scale from the beginning it's a breeze.

What does sales enablement look like?

It can take all kinds of forms. Creating and sharing case studies to help partners visualise projects. Running

partners can quote for deals autonomously, which saves them loads of time and a headache. And we'll sit beside partners when they're meeting with their customers so that there's an expert in the room to field the most challenging questions.

Give us one example of a reseller winning deals?

We helped one of our partners land a tender

wasn't heavily invested in the mobile data market. But this was a multi-million pound opportunity so they needed our help going all-in. We helped them write the tender, presented it to their customer with them, ramped up our supply chain to match the tender's production schedule (52,000 endpoints connected in two weeks), and hand-picked our top team members to handle

Partners are coming to us unprompted, asking how they can get involved

webinars that help them understand the technology and market. Giving keynotes at channel events to equip them with sales tactics. Simplifying pricing so that

with the Department for Education. They needed to remotely connect 52,000 underprivileged students so they could learn from home. Before this, the partner

the requirements. But what really sealed the deal was our proof-of-concept which we came up with quicker and tested more successfully than the competition.

mobile connectivity potential

markets outside of the UK. When their customers have international operations that partners can easily service, it's a clear choice. The customer can lean on a provider they trust and the partner gets a bigger share of wallet from their customer. Again, it's easy when you're using mobile data. Delivering fixed connectivity overseas is a nightmare since every country has multiple operators. But with intelligent mobile data you can skip past all the roaming agreements and deployment hassle anywhere in the world.

Where is customer and partner value moving to, and how are you capturing that value?

Right now, life is all about choice. You can get any food delivered straight to your home, anytime. Hail a cab from anywhere. Visit a comparison site that chooses the right credit card for you. And because there's so much choice, channel partners need to have their finger on the pulse, always.

Customers expect you to be at your best, at all times with on-demand support as and when they need it. So give it to them. That's the value customers are looking for, and that's the best way for partners to provide it. Same goes for suppliers: Give channel partners full attention and ample choice during projects and beyond. Focus on reliability, flexibility and strong market knowledge to give credibility to your relationships.

What are the three biggest challenges facing the comms channel right now and why?

The biggest is easily the PSTN switch-off. It's a way bigger challenge than most

people realise. Exchanges are switching off every day and it's not just about migration – partners need to future-proof their solutions and secure revenue growth now. Avoid recontracting PSTN-related products like ADSL at all costs. You could get stuck in the contract and unable to migrate away in time, at which point you'll have to buy a new service anyway and scramble to implement it.

Secondly, there's hardware acquisition. Brexit and chip shortages are driving some tough conversations around costs right now. The solution is simple: Buy stock and fit

support to help the channel understand what's at stake here. Otherwise, we'll end up in the same boat as Germany – panic ensued when its 2018 deadline arrived and businesses hadn't switched. Lifts, security cameras, door access systems, not to mention businesses using ADSL as primary connectivity, were all at risk of shutting down. German partners had to change their tyres at full speed, spending a fortune on expensive fallbacks that weren't even a good fit for their businesses.

But the opportunity itself is huge. IoT connectivity is the

example: For connecting autonomous vehicles you'd use a zero-latency network slice, so the cars can make split second decisions to move if there's a truck barreling down the road on a crash course. Or if you needed to connect thousands of small endpoints in a factory, you'd use a slice built for device capacity.

Is it time for partners to migrate away from 2G and 3G services?

Because 2G and 3G are used to connect lots of tricky deployments like smart meters or underground sensors it can be hard to swap out for new technology. But the 2G-3G sunset is inevitable and other technologies like LTE-M and NB-IoT provide far better quality of service, use far less battery power and can easily reach deep underground or through dense urban areas because of the lower frequencies they operate at.

What can we expect to see from Pangea this year?

More channel-only, IoT-only support for partners with multi-network 4G and 5G, eSIMs, L2TP and NB-IoT. More helping partners to get customers banging down their doors for intelligent mobile data services. More business development advice, empowering partners to unlock immediate and long-term revenue streams, plan for the future and go international. And we have one big portal-related surprise coming up for our current partners. Think visualising your entire solution with the push of a button. Full, autonomous control. Checking to see if the PSTN will affect your services and ordering new ones. Watch this space. ■

Data is king right now. Customers need more and more granular information from IoT solutions because it translates directly into time and money savings

it into your pipeline ahead of time. Especially when it comes to tech that's highly sought after, like 5G devices. Lastly, recruitment. It can be tricky finding people with the skills your team needs. If you're building an in-house IoT and mobile data team, ask your supplier what traits to look for in fresh engineers and sales people.

What are your current strategic priorities?

Migrating partners away from the PSTN. We're pushing for partners to realise how urgent the situation is. It's one of the biggest changes in UK telecoms infrastructure in over a century and there are still 2.4 million businesses that rely on the PSTN. We need Government-level

perfect match for PSTN-based solutions. Things like cash machines, street furniture and telemetry all work best when sending small chunks of data over wireless connections. Fixed alternatives like SoGEA and FTTC will cost more and won't last as long or be fit for purpose. Plus, not every telephone exchange will have FTTC or FTTP available.

How big an opportunity is 5G?

Many partners still think 5G is simply a faster 4G, but the 1Gbps+ speeds is just icing on the cake. You've got near-zero latencies for lag-free solutions, one million devices per km² for massive deployments, and network slicing that effortlessly lets you customise the mobile data you're offering. For

What trends are you tracking in the market that interest you most?

Data is king right now. Customers need more and more granular information from IoT solutions because it translates directly into time and money savings: Planning routes and saving fuel with vehicle telemetry, preserving medicine with temperature sensors, boosting farm yield with soil moisture monitoring, and so on. That's why intelligent mobile connectivity is so strong. It's built to fit these requirements, giving levels of visibility and control that can't be matched at the most efficient cost in the market.

On top of that, we're also seeing partners seek out

A tribute to industry beacon Crissi Williams

By Jo Evans, Head of Communications, The Institute of Telecommunications Professionals (ITP)

Crissi passed away unexpectedly on 2nd March 2022. The loss of Crissi is unfathomable and deeply felt by all of us here at the ITP. Crissi was our straight-talking and down to earth CEO: Not only have we lost an inspirational leader, but a mentor and friend.

For many, Crissi was a role model, living and breathing the values she so passionately promoted. She openly discussed the fact that she left school without any qualifications, but demonstrated that with hard work and determination anything is possible.

Crissi originally joined the ITP in 2008 as Office Manager having worked in various recruitment roles. Only recently she told us that she certainly didn't aspire to be a CEO. But thanks to two female mentors, Ann Potterton and Lucy Woods, her eyes were opened to the opportunity and she was encouraged to step up to the mark.

And step up she did, achieving many things. Most notably, launching an apprenticeship scheme creating hundreds of jobs that would never have existed without her. She championed diversity and advocated apprenticeships for everyone, irrespective of background or gender. Over the past

few years she had become a familiar face in the trade press and industry events, raising awareness of diversity and addressing the skills gap. She was passionate about her work in STEM and making a difference to young peoples' lives, particularly women, and she championed that through her work with the ITP.

The results of her work are everywhere you look in our industry. From the jubilant winners of the ITP Awards to the apprentices now in senior roles who are members of the ITP Journal Board. Her down to earth demeanour meant she was accessible and able to communicate with everyone from school leavers to senior industry professionals. She was admired and respected by both.

Josh Fowler, one of the first apprentices recruited by the ITP in 2013, summarises perfectly how we all felt about Crissi and her legacy. "I was lucky to have met Crissi and become one of the first ever apprentices via the ITP scheme," he said. "Crissi soon became one of my biggest cheerleaders and believed in me as my career started in telecommunications. She was never far away, cheering me on, and as the years went by our relationship grew on a professional level. We formed a great friendship and in a way, a



Crissi Williams

form of extended family, as is the whole of the ITP.

"If I had one word to describe Crissi, it would be 'authentic'. I know she touched the hearts of many with her authenticity. She remained true to herself,

Crissi put other people first and went out of her way to help

her values, and lived them every day. Admirable. Her laughter was infectious and she had a cracking sense of humour which I will never forget. Her passion for the telecoms industry showed, along with her passion of equality and providing a platform for women in tech and apprenticeships."

Since the announcement of her death, tributes have

flooded in via the condolence board, emails, social media, messages and drop ins to ITP HQ for a (strong!) cup of tea and a chat with her ITP family. All reinforce how well respected and loved she was, with recurring comments about her kindness,

determination, and of course, her ever-changing hair colour.

Crissi had many plans for the ITP in 2022, including a campaign to challenge perceptions around apprenticeships. She planned to continue matching mentors with mentees, celebrate individual achievements at the annual awards and get back to meeting members face-

to-face at ITP events. We will proudly carry on with this work in her name.

The ITP wasn't Crissi's only passion. She was a wonderful and dedicated mother to Jack and Lizzy, a devoted wife to Tony, a pub landlady, godmother, aunty, sister, best friend and a rock to many. She loved a cold glass of Pinot Grigio with absurd amounts of ice, being with family and friends and laughing.

She was real, tenacious, loyal and unapologetic, never afraid to speak up or speak out. But she was also kind and compassionate. Crissi put other people first and went out of her way to help, no matter who they were. That was Crissi Williams, and we will miss her forever. ■

Crissi Williams, 5th November 1980 – 2nd March 2022.



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A hybrid events calendar bri

With the UK's vaccination campaign working to contain the worst effects of Covid-19, the ICT industry is itching to fill the calendar with live events, awards dinners and networking gatherings. But this does not spell the end for digital events.

While face-to-face events are key to strengthening industry bonds, the pandemic has seen online events evolve into a useful tool for sharing key information with a wide range of partners regardless of geography.

With this in mind, we asked this month's contributors the following question - are you embracing face-to-face events once more or are you content to learn, meet and greet online?



AMELIA EBDON
ENREACH UK

At Enreach we have found that a hybrid approach has suited us and our customers in every area of the business – including events. We've found that by being adaptive to both types of event, we can get the benefits of both. Online events allowed us to speak to customers right across the UK from the comfort of their own spaces. In-person events help us connect with and assess a customer's potential needs on hand with a dedicated team. Demonstrating products and software works well on both platforms and the huge improvements in video calling technology have allowed people to feel more connected and comfortable with this method of communication. We believe being flexible and agile with events going forwards is the way to continue reaching a diverse and connected audience who are keen to find out more and want to have the choice as to how they do so.



CHERIE HOWLETT
JOLA

We are certainly attending face-to-face events once more, however, we are still seeing high attendees at our monthly webinars. During the pandemic we engaged in multiple online events and hosted our own. Also, our sales team are continuing to be very productive running meetings on Teams. I have seen an improvement in the quality of online events and new software has helped audiences engage, however, there is no substitute for face-to-face meetings in my view. We forget sometimes how many of our channel relationships have been forged in person over dinner or drinks. For me, online meetings are much more efficient, which is great once relationships are established but face-to-face meetings are an opportunity to establish trust, uncover opportunities and do great business.



WILL MOREY
PRAGMA GROUP

As always, it is about a hybrid approach and tailoring your events to the best medium and offering choices for the attendees. The pandemic drove the need to adapt to remote meetings and I think we have had our eyes opened to how much can be done remotely. Online events can deliver the content which is often all that is needed, however, the informal networking and fun that goes with getting a group of people together are key drivers for many attendees deciding to participate in an event. We are looking forward to hosting more in-person events again, like our Annual Conference at the end of April and attending more channel events like Channel Champions, Comms Vision and others. The response we've had from our customers for us to host in-person events again has been really strong. People are looking forward to gathering and having conversations over a beer or glass of wine.



ANDRE ARMSTRONG
MAINTEL

I think that pre-pandemic, many face-to-face events were mediocre. Attendees came away with tidbits of knowledge that had a limited impact on their jobs or lives. During the pandemic online events significantly increased and we saw the rise of virtual platforms like Hopin for large scale events. We also saw numerous creative ideas employed by organisations to drive attendance to smaller events, such as cooking virtually with a professional chef or wine tasting. Yet many people grew increasingly tired of online events and for organisers it became harder to drive up attendance. Now it is time to embrace face-to-face events once more. I think we'll still see challenges with in-person events due to legacy COVID, hybrid working and increasing costs. Organisers and individuals will adapt to this and I'm hoping this drives more engaging events where the emphasis is placed on attendees gaining knowledge that can make real impact to their jobs or lives.



BERNIE MCPHILLIPS
PANGEA

Taking a physical event and making it digital requires flexibility, creativity and a boatload of hard work. So huge kudos to teams that ran events over the last couple of years. That said, the pandemic proved just how much of our communication is nonverbal. Tone of voice, gestures, posture and facial expressions all lose effectiveness with fully digital events and when it comes to striking deals, educating partners or just making friends, it's much harder doing it through a Zoom letterbox. The best approach is a blended approach. Take Mobile World Congress 2022: you could stream all 17 hours of their keynotes on-demand from home (no missing valuable content just because you can't make it!), or you could go to Barcelona for the full networking experience. Partners should keep attending webinars and Q&As online and as many big events throughout the year as possible. Best of both worlds.

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IAN ROWAN
WILDIX

It's been a tough two years, but as a whole the channel, as with other challenges it has faced, has adapted well and moved quickly to ensure that online services replaced those face-to-face meetings. During this time Wildix has enhanced its product range to offer more services that customers required such as tiled view with conferencing, webinar services for mass audiences and improvements to our Wizzyconf station by adding third-party support for conferencing. These changes let our partners and customers have the best possible experience during the imposed restrictions. Now these restrictions are over, the desire to meet in person seems to be at an all-time high and this is encouraging for the market as this converts into business. As good as the tools you have, and I think we have the best, you can't do better than in-person interactions to build and develop relationships.



DARREN FARNDEN
CITYFIBRE

In response to the pandemic we had to rethink and rewrite our strategy regarding both internal and external events to adhere to mandatory obligations and keep our employees safe. As the guidelines were observed our use of applications such as Teams and Zoom increased and proved to be essential in connecting with our customers and colleagues. Although these applications remain invaluable in connecting people, we are striving to see each other face to face more to collaborate and to continue to build relationships. We do so of course against the backdrop of Covid still impacting our lives and, as a company, we're maintaining a considered and careful approach in order to keep our employees and those we meet as safe as possible. Nonetheless we're positive and excited about bringing our teams and partners together at our own as well as major channel events in 2022.



JAIME WILLIAMS
GAMMA

The pandemic accelerated a hybrid/online approach to events: the success of which can be attributed to the impressive capabilities of available (and often under-utilised) technology. We were aware of the benefits of using webinars to remotely promote updates to our partners, but the pandemic was, sadly, the catalyst that highlighted the need for this technology and the impressive impact it has on user experience. It was the push that forced businesses to invest in it. After pivoting to fully digital events, we quickly learnt that online environments are great for content consumption, but at the same time, they can't emulate the type of engagement and relationship-building of an in-person event. There's definitely a place for virtual events moving forward and we will be continuing with our extensive webinar programme, however, there's no replacement for face-to-face interaction for building and strengthening ties within the industry between our customers, partners, and peers.



MARK DRESSEL
VIRTUAL1

We have missed the networking that comes with face-to-face events: plus, channel parties are always a good time! This year we're making a big push to attend and host events in person. It's true that software like Teams and Zoom are easy, cost-effective ways to stay in touch; but they could never be permanent solutions. I'm sure we all remember Zoom fatigue! After all, speech is just one ingredient in a conversation. Body language plays a huge role and it's especially important for building rich, trusting relationships between partners. Plus, when you're face-to-face, you know the person you're talking to isn't sneaking a quick look at their emails or getting their Twitter fix. At Virtual1, we're striking a balance between the two: using virtual solutions for day-to-day comms but meeting face-to-face for the big stuff wherever possible. All the benefits of digital transformation, while keeping the value of traditional meetings.



CAMILLA KARM
REDSQUID

After two years of being online we are once again embracing face-to-face and have merged to becoming fully omnichannel in our approach. We find that digital and physical events go perfectly together and create the opportunity to meet new and existing customers wherever they are. Both channels have their unique capabilities and as we are a nationwide reseller, online events and meetings have allowed us to meet our customers frequently throughout the pandemic, whereas, we now are seeing a bigger appetite to meet face to face. Many are craving real-life interactions and when taking a new organisation through the digital transformation, face-to-face allows us to be on-site with our customers to get a 360-view of their requirements to see where we can make the biggest difference to them and build on a long-term partnership as their trusted advisor.



ELLIE ALLSEYBROOK
INFORM BILLING

Although there is definitely a place for virtual events, face-to-face will always be my preference and we were back embracing them at the first opportunity. The pandemic brought improvements to platforms, much greater exposure to virtual events and now that a lot of the fatigue has passed, there is definitely a greater acceptance to attending events online. Virtual events can also be great when time is tight and sessions can be held in bite-sized chunks. Inform Billing has successfully run demos and training sessions online for years, but for larger events involving more delegates, true engagement is still challenging – it's far too easy to be distracted and much harder to ensure commitment. Ours is a social industry and for me events are an opportunity to build relationships, loyalty and trust – all of which are easiest done in person.

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Virtual1's key hire



Mark Dressel

THE creative direction and strategy of Virtual1's marketing operations is now spearheaded by incoming Head of Marketing Mark Dressel. He joins from Assembly Global Networks where he managed the marketing communications, brand and lead generation function for the MSP. Dressel brings 20 years experience in B2B marcoms, his prior experience also including notable stints at Cable&Wireless and the BBC. His new remit is to support the sales team and delivery of Virtual1's marketing and communications roadmap for partners.

"This is the most exciting time in the last 20 years for technology," commented Dressel. "We are here to help our partners move towards tomorrow with confidence, meet disruptive challenges head on – and win."

Commenting on the appointment, Virtual1's Product Strategy

Director Neil Wilson said: "Mark's extensive career experience, creative vision and passion for technology will undoubtedly make an impact on the channel."

Also on the move...

SOFTWARE and service provider Cloudsoft has expanded its management team with the appointment of Tim Shirley as VP of Software Sales. He brings more than a decade of experience in the managed cloud sector and was most recently Country



Tim Shirley

Manager for Scotland at Rubrik. His prior experience also includes stints at Proact IT UK, DTP Group and Hewlett-Packard. Cloudsoft CEO Ross Gray said: "This is a timely appointment: The forthcoming Digital Operational Resilience Act (DORA) from the EU and similar legislation expected in the UK will add complexity to the financial services sector. Businesses will need to work with experts that can help them boost their resilience and create more effective and scalable systems in the process."

A REVAMP of Exertis's senior leadership team sees Chief Digital and Marketing Officer Vishal Chhatralia move to a global role. He joined the tech distributor in 2019 with a



Vishal Chhatralia

remit to develop digital capabilities within Exertis UK, including online, cloud, direct2consumer, data analytics and RPA. Tim Griffin, Managing Director of DCC Technology, said: "Vish has successfully built blueprints for many initiatives in the UK and now we begin the process of scaling these out." In other UK moves, Phill Turner, Global Head of Voice of the Customer, becomes Chief Experience Officer reporting to Paul Bryan, Managing Director of Exertis UK. Robert Fitzsimons, UK Marketing Director, and Kati Eagle, Purchasing Director, will also now report directly into Bryan.

DISTOLOGY has pulled in **Rob Darby** as Sales Director. In June last year he joined **Pulsant** as Director of Channel Sales, having moved from **CommsCare** where he was Sales Director then Commercial Director. His 20 years industry experience also includes a stint at **Ingram Micro**. "Channel is my passion and has been the key focus of my career," said Darby.

XELION UK has turned up its messaging volume with the appointment of **Claire Brooks** as Marketing Manager. She brings 14 years experience in corporate sales and marketing and most recently ran her own social media management business. **Xelion UK MD Dave Reynolds** said:



"Claire's key focus is to work more closely with our partners when it comes to elevating the Xelion brand."

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