



How Bramley led Croft's MSP transition p18

Countdown to the Comms National Awards begins p26



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Comms People

This month's movers and shakers



4Com aids staff on energy costs

BOURNEMOUTH-based business comms provider 4Com has thrown a £200 per month financial lifeline to all 431 staff in a bid to help them counteract the impact of fast rising energy prices.

SPECIAL REPORT

4Com's Energy Support Bonus was announced to staff during a regular monthly briefing.

The scheme came into effect last month and will continue to operate until further notice.

The cash boost comes on the back of news that energy bills are likely to exceed £4,000 a year from January 2023.

4Com Chairman Daron Hutt (pictured) commented: "I said a couple of months ago that we

wanted to help if costs rose, and we are now seeing the situation with energy costs crystallising.

"We've built a fantastic team, and the combined efforts of everyone have helped the company continue to grow.

"Thanks to that growth, we're in a position where we can help offset some of the price rises that are clearly coming."

Chief Executive Officer Gary Scutt added: "Our priority with the Energy Support Bonus is supporting the team we've

built over the years. They're our most valuable asset.

"We are also continuing to grow at a rapid pace with over 50 roles currently available.

"This bonus will be extended to all new staff joining 4Com moving forwards."

4Com Technologies began its commercial life in 1999 and provides unified comms solutions to UK SMEs.

The company topped The Sunday Times Best Companies to Work For rankings in 2017.

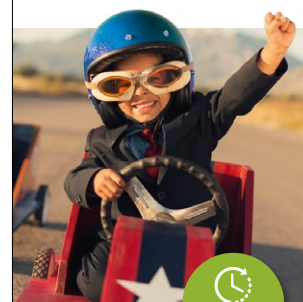
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EDITOR'S COMMENT



Stuart Gilroy

IT'S fair to say that the nation has nigh on sleepwalked into the long-known-about energy crisis. Boiling temperatures and droughts took the sting out of the cold reality that's been waiting for us all down the line – but now the facts are hitting home

with thoughts turning from how to keep ice cool during heatwaves to how to keep warm during the winter.

This truly is a crisis waiting in the wings and we've all known the script for many months, but it has taken the passing of time to bring the issue into greater and more relevant clarity – only now are we giving the matter top priority status as we face into winter with a penny drop moment.

Proper planning should not wait until a crisis or event that requires action lands directly under our noses. Actionable foresight is the order of the day, meaning more time to plan and prepare, leaving no room for avoidance and uncertainty. Yet, as we went to press there was no sign of a plan of action from a government that appears to have switched off during its leadership transition phase. From this paralysis we would be wise to learn an industry lesson.

With three years to go until the 2025 PSTN switch off and the transition to all-IP we have time and scope to thrive on, and drive change. To be in control of your destiny is a wonderful thing – but there will be those do-nothings who wait until the last minute before realising what's been obvious for a long time, then hit the panic button and get caught in the headlights.

We can all see were procrastination over the energy catastrophe has brought us to: There's no time like the present, so start planning for 2025 now.

Stuart Gilroy, Editor

- Six Degrees CISO Paul Rose assesses risk following the pandemic and how to build a resilient organisation (p34).
- NextGenAccess Sales Director Steve Mackervoy on the full fibre landscape, market cross currents, the challenges facing altnets and why the channel is critical to driving adoption rates (p36).

Infinigate in Vuzion deal



Klaus Schlichtherle

CYBER security VAD Infinigate has added Microsoft capabilities with the acquisition of cloud distie and Microsoft Indirect Provider Vuzion, which serves over 600 resellers and one million cloud users.

Vuzion emerged from Fareham-based Cobweb Solutions in 2016 and during the past three years recorded organic year-on-year growth of more than 30%.

Infinigate Group CEO Klaus Schlichtherle stated: "The acquisition is a strategic move because cyber security and cloud are a natural fit. It enables us to ensure a more comprehensive security posture for end customers especially in the SMB space.

"In the coming quarter we will be investing in the core

Vuzion business in the UK and will develop a joint approach across EMEA."

Vuzion MD Michael Frisby added: "Joining forces allows us to provide more expertise and services and generates new employment opportunities as we grow our teams in the UK, Ireland and Europe."

Schlichtherle and Frisby also noted that cyber security start-ups are increasingly operating a full subscription-based model and that the acquisition helps vendors and partners adapt to this model.

"Emerging cyber security start-ups also view access to the Microsoft channel as a key asset, and Infinigate will now be able to offer solutions for both cyber security and cloud," added Schlichtherle.

NEWS ROUNDUP

SWANSEA-based IT provider Gower Business Systems (which specialises in the legal and professional services sector) has been acquired by Flotek, adding circa £1.2m revenue. Gower Business Systems was founded by Mark Wyatt, former international Wales Rugby Union player, and Mark Bowling.

KICK ICT's tech capabilities received a boost following its acquisition of Consilium UK. The deal also provides a stronger presence in London. Consilium was founded in 1998 and provides IT consulting, support, cloud and security services. Former MD and owner Richard Abrams has been appointed Head of Technical Services. Co-directors Stuart Beattie and David Hood also join Kick ICT Group along with 25 former Consilium staff.

LOGICALIS' Microsoft and IT services capabilities across UK&I have been augmented by its acquisition of Q Associates, a provider of IT consultancy and advisory services around data management, data protection, compliance and information security. "The acquisition strengthens our partnership portfolio," commented Alex Louth, who is CEO of Logicalis UK&I.

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NEWS ROUNDUP

MANAGED network solution provider Expereo has acquired Surrey-based Breeze Networks in a deal that boosts its SD-WAN/SASE practice. CEO Irwin Fouwels said: "We are expanding our SD-WAN services to address the growing need for agile, cost-effective cloud access and global network solutions." Expereo is seeking more acquisitions supported by majority investor Vitruvian Partners and minority investor Apax Partners SAS.

TELECOM Acquisitions' purchase of Hive Telecom is its fourth deal and supports what the firm says is 'well structured organic growth'. The company plans to double its size over the next two years and is on the hunt for more acquisition targets.

VMO2 has boosted digital inclusion charity, Good Things Foundation, with a £2m donation to help disadvantaged people across the UK get online and gain digital skills. The donation, which is part of a three year partnership, will help create 5,000 Digital Inclusion Hubs via Good Things Foundation's network of community partners, enabling one million people to access digital experiences by the end of 2025.

Capacity boost for partners

BT WHOLESALE partners are more easily able to meet demand for higher and more flexible bandwidth through the acquisition of a single 100Gbps data centre port, removing the need to acquire multiple ports which require aggregation and the management of corresponding circuits.

Gavin Jones, Channel Sales Director, BT Wholesale, commented: "100Gb Data Centre Connect enhances partners' capability to support their customers who are increasingly demanding greater connectivity, driven largely by the acceleration of digital transformation, cloud migration, as well as the evolution of data centres, AI and IoT technologies.

"Partners require access solutions that deliver more capacity while reducing the cost and complexity of deployment."

Initially available in Telehouse North and Telehouse North Two, BT Wholesale is rolling out the higher bandwidth service to more data centres across the country.

According to Omdia's latest Wholesale Customer Survey the highest ranking future growth area within the next two years is greater connectivity.

Onecom tag adopted by 9

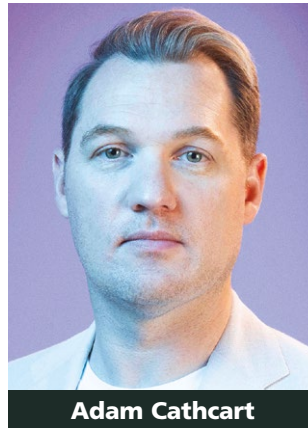
9 GROUP'S partner business has rebranded as Onecom Partners in a move that coincides with the launch new products and services and fresh plans to accelerate channel growth.

LDC-backed Onecom Group acquired 9 Partners in 2021, combining its scale and relationships with top tier industry suppliers including Vodafone and BT Wholesale with 9's channel experience.

Onecom Partners MD Adam Cathcart said: "Onecom Partners has strengthened its relationship with key suppliers, enabling partners to access a wider range of services. This includes the recently announced strategic partnership with Vodafone which encompassed wholesale and distribution of mobile airtime, SIP, connectivity, IoT and 5G.

"The Partner business has also expanded its partnership with BT Wholesale having recently launched BT's WHC (Wholesale Hosted Communications) IP telephony offering to add to Onecom Partners' current range of IP voice services."

Cathcart confirmed that Onecom Partners will continue to trade as a separate entity within



Adam Cathcart

the Onecom Group with independent partner portals, systems and supplier agreements. See page 12

NEWS ROUNDUP

UNION Street Technologies has introduced a self-service management portal to its aBILlity billing platform. The optional feature, which is called Billnow, enables resellers' customers to view up-to-the minute changes in their service usage, conduct their own reporting and make changes to their services. The Billnow option also enables customers to perform SIM swaps, check associated networks and SIM numbers, and set bars for certain services. Union Street Technologies MD Vincent Disneur commented: "Billnow provides users with a broad range of options to self-manage and control the services they buy from the channel."

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

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

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

Sales Director: Simon Turton
sturton@bpl-business.com 07759 731 134

Business Development Manager: Heather Miles
hmiles@bpl-business.com 07519 790 297

Production: Frank Voeten
fvoeten@bpl-business.com

Circulation: info@bpl-business.com

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Focus Group inks STL deal



Pictured (l-r): Rhys Bailey (Sales Director, Focus), Brendon Cross, Vicki Rishbeth (Technical Director, Focus) and Barney Taylor (CEO, Focus)

FOCUS Group's acquisition of Witney-based STL Communications provides a strategic foothold to more comprehensively service the M4 corridor and midlands region.

Other attractions were a strong management team, a long-standing customer base, high levels of recurring revenue and strong organic growth.

STL Communications founder Brendon Cross will continue to consult for the business which will operate under its own brand name for the foreseeable future.

Focus Group plans to invest in STL Communications' operation and establish a key regional hub for the group.

Ralph Gilbert, co-founder and Director at Focus Group, commented: "We have developed a considered approach to acquisitions over recent years, and carefully target the right businesses off-market, rather than waiting for sellers to come to us."

"We worked with Brendon over a number of months to find a transaction that worked for both parties."

NEWS ROUNDUP

PANGEA'S Scottish presence has expanded with a new office in Glasgow which Sales Director Bernie McPhillips hails as a 'thriving hub for IoT'. "It was the first Scottish city to offer IoT connectivity to local businesses, with £6m in LoRa rolled out, and its digital tech sector boasts almost 34,000 jobs and a turnover of more than £1bn," he said. "Having a foothold in Glasgow will help us stand shoulder to shoulder with our partners in this thriving city."

BROMSGROVE comms provider Armstrong Bell has added IT support and MSP capabilities following the acquisition of Birmingham-based Control and Shift. The deal brings skills in IT support, Microsoft 365 and server hosting. Armstrong Bell's Head of Customer Service Dan Black commented: "Our customers have always asked if we can also manage their IT and we can now provide these products and services." The acquisition sees Control and Shift's five-man team join Armstrong Bell, with MD Rob Savage becoming Head of IT at the wider group.

Wavenet strengthens security capabilities with OGL swoop

SOLIHUL-based Wavenet has acquired fellow midlands located IT solutions and cyber security services provider OGL Computer Support Holdings and its two subsidiaries OGL Computer Support Ltd and CyberGuard Technologies.

The deal significantly bolsters Wavenet's portfolio of solutions and services.

Wavenet Chief Commercial Officer Philip Grannum commented: "An increasing amount of organisations are outsourcing their IT requirements from infrastructure management to security and monitoring, sim-

ply because it is more cost and resource efficient than keeping it in-house.

"This acquisition is in line with our business growth strategy that also includes organic growth, partnerships and product expansion."

OGL CTO Paul Colwell added: "The acquisition is an opportunity to extend our reach into new markets and across Wavenet's customer base."

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Philip Grannum

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NEWS ROUNDUP

A PUBLIC cloud for SMB offering introduced by ANS enables businesses to lift and shift their code into a pre-configured AWS or Azure environment. The model shifts towards repeatable automation, which CTO Joe Wolski states will enable more SMBs to engage with cloud migration services. "Public cloud has for too long been the reserve of organisations with significant in-house skills or huge budgets," he commented. "We're offering SMBs the opportunity to get to the value in their cloud projects quickly." The model also allows customers to migrate managed services across to ANS without having to rebuild their platform up front.

CRAWLEY-based integrator Vindex Systems has been acquired by Johnson Controls. Vindex designs, installs and maintains access control, CCTV and ANPR (automatic number plate recognition) systems for organisations across the banking, retail, healthcare, aerospace and commercial property sectors. "This acquisition demonstrates the strengthening of our holistic security and safety services," commented Carl Hogg, GM for Integrated Security Solutions, Johnson Controls UK&I.

Councils lack plan for 2025

PUBLIC service disruption is inevitable unless all councils establish a strategy for the 2025 PSTN switch off, warned Maintel CTO Dan Davies.

According to figures sourced by Maintel, 23 of the 40 councils across England and Wales that responded to a Freedom of Information request (56%) have no plans in place for the PSTN and ISDN withdrawal.

Up to 70% of the London boroughs questioned also have no strategy for alarm lines, traffic light systems, payment terminals, payphone lines, medical devices and external connectivity to telephony systems.

"Failure to plan for the WLR withdrawal deadline could have a huge impact on organisations, their users and their citizens," stated Davies.

"Without services such as alarms or lifts, which rely on PSTN lines, offices and hospitals will not meet safety standards and will be forced to close. Telephony systems that connect to the outside world via ISDN could also be cut off. Decision makers should not wait until 2025 as exchanges are being phased out now.

"The past two years have delivered uncertainty, but the



Dan Davies

2025 deadline for the PSTN and ISDN switch off is one thing that's for certain. Councils must act now to ensure services can continue to function."

Davies recommends a rapid audit of networks to understand the number and nature of connections and what they are used for. "These could be anything from simple voice lines to DSL broadband, building alarm circuits or even all external connectivity to the telephony system," he added.

"Whatever the existing WLR ISDN/PSTN services, there are a number of easy migration paths to ensure the normal running of the organisation is uninterrupted. Leaving it to the last minute could result in increased installation costs and delays."

Spending on cloud set to rise

INVESTMENT into cloud services is set to accelerate over the next 24 months with circa 50% of enterprises poised to spend big.

Research by Colt also confirmed that sustainability is a core component of cloud adoption for decision makers.

Strong partner support was credited for easing cloud migrations for early adopters and two-thirds of firms found the process easier than expected.

But flexible connectivity is the top feature that IT leaders wish they had integrated into their cloud projects.

Jaya Deshmukh, EVP Strategy and Transformation, Colt, said: "Businesses plan to invest heavily in the cloud and some perceived challenges around migration were unfounded.

"This was put down to the key role partners play in delivering cloud deployments in terms of set up and optimisation."

The report also highlighted that SASE and hybrid and multi-cloud orchestration are two features enterprises are considering integrating into their next cloud projects.

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Wayside acquires IT distie



Dale Foster

WAYSIDE Technology Group has snapped up IT channel distributor Spinnakar for £9.8m, widening its reach in EMEA and strengthening its storage, cloud, security and data management offering.

The acquisition will bring scale and channel expertise to Wayside as well as more than 15 vendor partners including Cloudian, Deep Instinct, Rubrik, Virtuozzo, Vast Data, among others.

Wayside CEO Dale Foster stated: "We expect this acquisition to be accretive to gross margin and net income, boosting growth and profitability."

Spinnakar will integrate with Wayside's European business units, Climb UK and Grey Matter, with CEO Gerard Brophy continuing to lead and scale its EMEA business.

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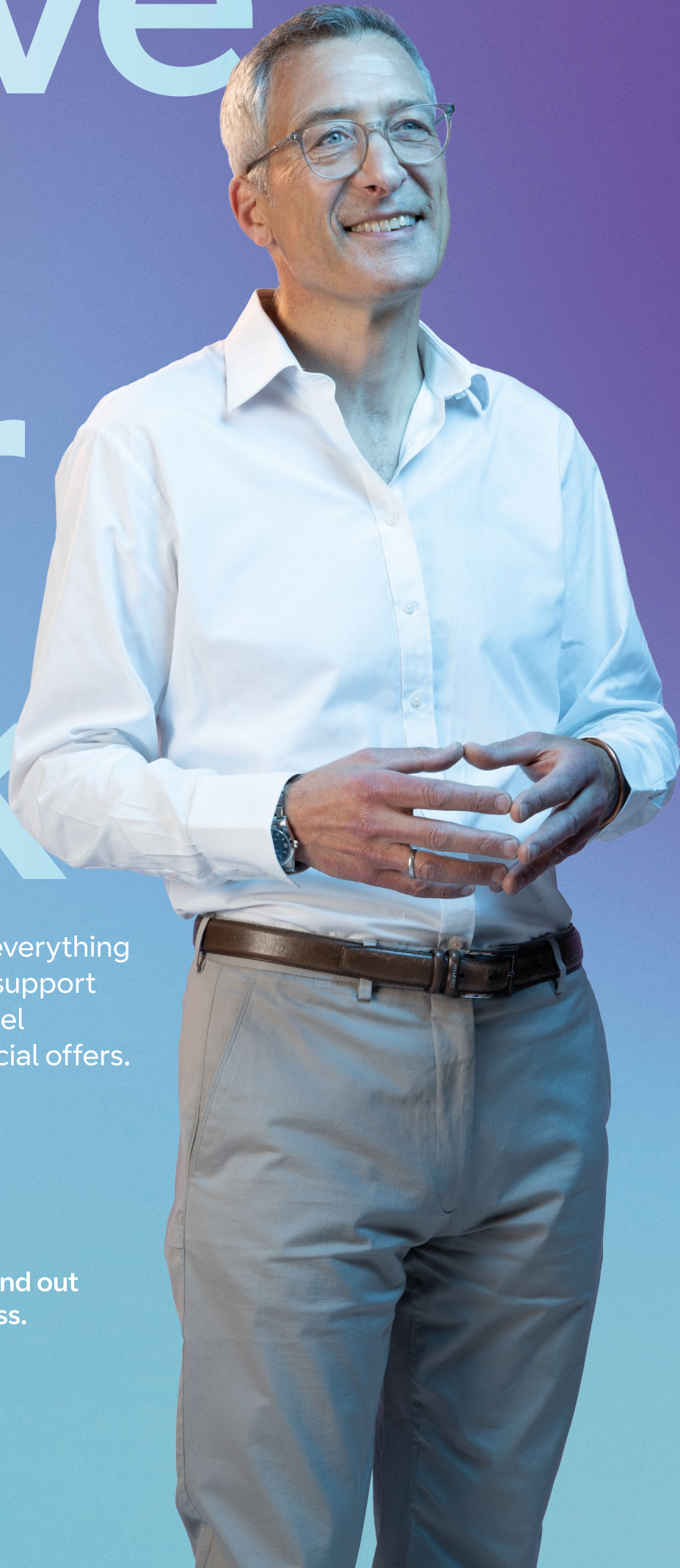
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Gavin Jones
Channel Director, BT Wholesale



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NEWS ROUNDUP

PRD Technologies has won a contract to provide an automated ISP billing solution to network firm WightFibre, which operates on the Isle of Wight. "The first step to addressing the complexities of flexible ISP broadband billing is not only to identify existing challenges but to also look to the future for what else might be required," said PRD MD Simon Adams. "ISPs need to diversify rapidly in the current market due to the boom in hybrid and flexible working and the associated demand for fast and reliable broadband, flexible services, packages and bundles."

HP IS SET to be a big player in the market for hybrid work solutions following the completion of its acquisition of Poly. Patrick Moorhead, CEO, Moor Insights & Strategy, said. "Combining Poly and HP is a win-win for both organisations."

NEOS Networks is to provide backhaul and data centre connectivity to support Giganet's southern counties network and FTTP services roll out. Giganet's own national network service plans are full fibre only, and its network expansion will see Neos Networks support Giganet to deliver a more than tenfold capacity increase.

Brolly boost for diversity



SCOTTISH IT provider Converged Communications Solutions has funded the installation of brightly coloured umbrellas throughout a local primary school to promote and celebrate the neurodiversity of its pupils.

Converged donated the ADHD Foundation's display and education pack to Ellon Primary, where 25 umbrellas have been installed throughout the school as part of a nationwide campaign to raise awareness of conditions such as ADHD, autism and dyslexia.

"With several of our staff living with a child diagnosed with ADHD or autism, this is a

topic close to our hearts," said Converged CSO Robbie Ross. "We hope that our involvement will help employees and employers recognise not just the challenges but also the benefits that come from living with neurodivergent conditions."

Converged MD Neil Christie said: "Around one in five people in the UK are neurodivergent, so there is a need to ensure our corporate environment is fully inclusive for these individuals."

"Our future workplace will and should be shaped around a diverse workforce and tapping into everyone's differing skill-sets is the key to success."

Ofcom set to enforce new rules

BROADBAND and mobile providers face tough new security rules introduced by Government and enforced by Ofcom.

From October Ofcom will be able to leverage new powers to ensure providers are taking specific measures to meet their new security duties.

Ofcom will have the power to carry out inspections of telecoms firms' premises and systems. Failure to meet requirements could lead to fines of up to 10% of turnover or, in the case of a continuing contravention, £100k per day.

Digital Infrastructure Minister Matt Warman commented: "We know how damaging cyber attacks on critical infrastructure can be. We are ramping up protections for these vital networks by introducing one of the world's toughest telecoms security regimes."

National Cyber Security Centre Technical Director Dr Ian Levy added: "These new regulations will ensure that the security and resilience of networks, and the equipment that underpins them, is appropriate for the future."

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NEWS ROUNDUP

CITYFIBRE'S brand refresh aims to address consumer confusion across the broadband market and drive take-up over its network. According to research 64% of consumers are unaware of the difference between full fibre and part fibre broadband, and CityFibre says its rebrand and differentiating messaging will help to clear things up. CMO Dan Ramsay commented: "Our new brand identity is bold and straight-talking, designed to cut through, engage and inform people."

LONDON headquartered MSP Core Technology Systems has bolstered its Microsoft expertise with the acquisition of Scotland-based Microsoft Gold Partner CompanyNet. The deal strengthens Core's technical capability and provides expansion opportunities into Scotland – with 25 employees and offices in Edinburgh and Glasgow included in the acquisition. Core Chief Executive Conor Callanan commented: "We are focused on developing capability and levels of service, and this acquisition means greater capability and additional resources." The transaction was completed with a funding package provided by ThinCats and supported by TMT M&A platform Danescor.

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


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Will Avaya recover?

Former comms giant Avaya has spectacularly faltered and is undergoing scrutiny following a profits warning. Is a new leadership vision enough to save it from collapse?

Avaya President and CEO Jim Chirico was removed from office on August 1st, making way for Alan Masarek who brings 30 years software and cloud-based business experience. He immediately signalled a root and branch review of the business. The leadership change coincided with a profit warning and news that Avaya's market worth had plummeted to under \$100m, pulled down by \$3bn debt and doubts about its future viability. Yet Avaya secured \$600m of new debt in June which has raised questions worthy of investigation as the business was in a sharp decline but did not publicly state these facts.

Avaya has now pinned its hopes on Masarek who most recently served as CEO of Vonage where he oversaw its transformation from a VoIP-based residential phone provider into a global enterprise cloud communications company. He was previously Director of Chrome & Apps at Google. Avaya Chairman Bill Watkins said: "After a rigorous search process the Board is confident that Alan is the ideal choice to lead the company into the future."

Masarek added: "I intend to undertake a comprehensive strategic and operating review of all facets of the business, and look forward to leveraging my background and years of cloud communications experience to propel Avaya to renewed growth and profitability."

An internal investigation has been launched into the circumstances surrounding Avaya's third quarter results and, having reported a net loss of \$1.4bn, some analysts believe it will be unable to prevent bankruptcy for a second time, having emerged from Chapter 11 five years ago. According to Vapour CEO Tim Mercer, Avaya's problems stem from a weak product roadmap, a vast base of legacy systems and its lateness to the cloud



Tim Mercer

Avaya's problems stem from a weak product roadmap, a vast base of legacy systems and its lateness to the cloud market.



Alan Masarek

I intend to undertake a comprehensive strategic and operating review of all facets of the business

market. "The question we're all asking – particularly as an Avaya partner – is whether Avaya has rested on its laurels for too long, and whether the horse has already bolted," said Mercer.

"From disparate price streams to the volume of

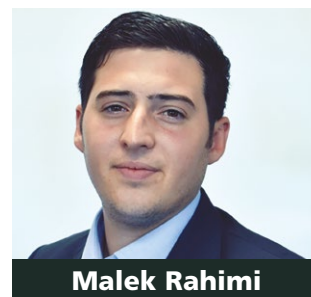


Ioan McRae

With the assets that Avaya has, the large customer base, I foresee no issues with it continuing as a going concern.

legacy services, the team won't have it easy in trying to turn this vast ship. Avaya could be bought by anyone from RingCentral to a more left of field organisation like Microsoft."

Ioan McRae, CEO of long-term Avaya partner



Malek Rahimi

I can't see Avaya being allowed to shut up shop. There is a great deal of product loyalty and long-term customer confidence.

Maintel, pointed out Avaya's strengths and predicts a brighter outcome. "With the assets that Avaya has, the large customer base, the resolutions to financial stability along with the cost reduction strategy that Alan has implemented, I foresee no issues with Avaya continuing as a going concern. In fact, once the R&D focus returns, with regular product delivery and with a clear roadmap communicated to customers and partners, Avaya will return to its dominant position in the global CCaaS market."

BDR Managing Director Malek Rahimi also believes that Avaya's globally installed base is a strength that will help it to withstand the current storm. "I can't see Avaya being allowed to shut up shop," he said. "There is a great deal of product loyalty out there and we are still seeing many on-premise customers pursuing latest version upgrades on an international scale.

"We are working with several large multinational Avaya customers on projects to integrate on-prem and self hosted Avaya systems with Teams to leverage existing installations. This would indicate long-term customer confidence in the product and its continued support and development."

If Avaya is to save itself for a second time, Mercer believes that Masarek is the right man for the job. "Avaya has a new and experienced CEO, hired to help turn the organisation around to a subscription-based business model," he stated. "It was absolutely the right call to appoint Masarek."



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All-in-One partner strate

The successful integration of channel service provider 9 Group into the Onecom empire is creating a broader scope of opportunities for reseller partners according to Martin Flick, Onecom Group CEO and Adam Cathcart, Managing Director of the newly branded Onecom Partners business which proclaims a watertight channel-first policy.

Cathcart's claims are supported by the fact that the response to the 9 acquisition and launch of Onecom Partners has been entirely positive with zero churn and zero naysayers. "We were aware that partners may have had concerns knowing the scale of the Onecom Group business, however this has been positively received based on the new services and commercials introduced to our channel partners," said Cathcart. "Our strategy is to be a true aggregator of services, providing partners with options from best of breed providers across a complete stack of mobile, connectivity and UC solutions."

Cathcart noted that Onecom Partners will continue to trade as a separate business entity with its own accounts, CRM, billing and provisioning systems. "We have always been transparent with partners and they can be confident they are working with a group that has a strong appetite to invest in and grow within the channel," he added. "We have not seen any partners leave following the acquisition. If anything, it has generated more new partner opportunities where some prospective resellers felt they may have outgrown the old 9 business and they have



Adam Cathcart

Our strategy is to be a true aggregator of services, providing partners with options from best of breed providers across a complete stack of mobile, connectivity and UC solutions

been keen to explore how we can support them as part of the larger Onecom Group."

According to Cathcart, Onecom's channel-first approach is paramount to plans in developing and scaling its channel offering. "We have only experienced three occasions when a partner was competing with our direct business," explained Cathcart. "Onecom withdrew its direct proposal

and recommended a partner as the preferred supplier for the customer. I am pleased to say that on all three occasions, our partners were successful in winning the deals."

Onecom is a well-financed business, reporting revenues in excess of £165 million in 2021. Cathcart assures resellers that its channel arm will get the backing needed to fulfil its objectives, fully

supporting the 400-plus partners on its books, helping them to grow and build value in their own businesses.

Growth strategy

Since securing a significant funding package from PE firm LDC in 2019, Onecom has completed seven acquisitions in total, including Onecom Partners, and has made significant investment in driving organic growth through increased

headcount and system development. "This has added material scale to the group, while also diversifying our market, product and supplier profile," added Cathcart. "Our strategy is to continue our approach to M&A and our partner community is an ideal place for us to identify new acquisition opportunities.

"Being part of the Onecom Group has not only expanded our product offering through an increased portfolio, but it also brings a wealth of industry experience from the wider team. That experience can be called upon to support our partners in many ways, including for example on larger opportunities where we may be able to assist with case studies, referenceability, technical support or an experienced safe pair of hands to front, joint bid or back a partner - pending their customer's requirements - supported by the financial clout and resources to help partners win bigger deals."

Cathcart also noted that Onecom Partners has strengthened its relationship with key suppliers, enabling partners to access a wider range of services. The recently announced strategic partnership with Vodafone encompasses wholesale and distribution of mobile airtime, SIP, connectivity, IoT and 5G.



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gy rolls out

"We have also reinvigorated our partnership with BT Wholesale by launching BT's WHC (Wholesale Hosted Communications) IP telephony offering to add to our current range of IP Voice Services," he added.

Onecom has built a strong reputation as a large mobile, cloud telephony and contact centre provider and its close partnership with Vodafone will be underlined when executives unveil their channel strategy at a launch event at the operator's HQ in Newbury on September 8th. Onecom Group CEO Martin Flick was keen to stress that the strategic Vodafone relationship extends way beyond mobility, with Onecom revenue now evenly split between mobile and other telephony services such as IP Voice, Connectivity, UC and UCaaS, all of which are now accessible to Onecom Partners.

Partnership building

"Onecom Group has ambitious growth plans for the channel," said Flick. "Our priority last year was around significant M&A activity and the integration of new elements into the business. There will be further M&A, but the focus this year is to build on organic growth and strategic partnerships, bringing together components of the business and fine tuning them to drive penetration in key markets. As a new route to market for the group, the channel provides us with the ability to scale via a large network of partners, all benefiting from our strong supplier relationships with leading networks and carriers."

On a broader scale, Onecom is keen to work



Martin Flick

The new brand represents the powerful combination of the channel experience that exists within Onecom Partners with the scale and expertise the wider Onecom Group offers

with partners wanting to take a lead in sustainability and encourages an open dialogue, leveraging the lessons of the pandemic to share ideas and best practices with its partner community. "We are all working in a fast-paced environment with emerging technologies and ever-changing best practice which we are continuously learning from and passing on knowledge to our partner channel," said Cathcart. "We host frequent online and in-person training sessions which are not only focused on products and services, but also key skills to win in the channel and help UK PLC drive a sustainability agenda.

"Our Intro to Telecoms is also a favourite for partners looking to upskill or refresh their employee's knowledge of the industry and our many acronyms. Additionally, our

porting masterclass is aimed at their experienced team members and supports them to manage the number porting minefield."

Flick noted that Onecom's decision to move away from the 9 brand was carefully considered, and based on feedback from the team, partners, prospective partners and suppliers. "The new brand represents the powerful combination of the channel experience that exists within Onecom Partners with the scale and expertise the wider Onecom Group offers," he stated. "Our relaunch event on September 8th was the next step in a long-term strategy to work closely in supporting and investing in our partner community. We have some innovative ideas planned for launch imminently, so watch this space."

Andy Randerson, KCOM's Wholesale Product Architect, talks about how the forthcoming migration away from PSTN is one of the biggest challenges facing network providers in a century

Public Switched Telephone Networks, or PSTN to give them their catchy acronym, and their closure is a hot topic in the industry at the moment.

As network providers across the UK draw up plans and grapple with the complexities of replacing their legacy copper networks for a more 21st Century-friendly fibre replacement, there's no shortage of effort being invested in this once in a lifetime transformation.

KCOM is no exception and, like many others, we've a legacy network running in parallel to our award winning full fibre network. In some cases our copper access network was deployed more than 100 years ago and our System X voice and data switches were deployed in the 1980s - which scarily is now four decades ago.

Luckily for us, we've deployed a full fibre network across Hull and its surrounding areas during the past 10 years, meaning we can transition from the legacy network and migrate customers onto full fibre easier than in other parts of the UK.

This will also allow a removal of copper as an access method for all customers, faster than other network providers. This puts us in the fortunate position of not having to provide an interim step, of supporting Fibre to the Cabinet (FTTC) technology, prior to Fibre To The Premises (FTTP) roll out. We're planning to close down our System X and copper access network by 2024.

As a regional provider, although our customer base is smaller, the technical challenges are very similar to those faced by other national network providers.

Careful communication and planning are essential to ensuring successful migration and this has been progressing in earnest for some time behind the scenes.

It's essential to engage early with vulnerable, and typically elderly, customers reliant on their copper phone lines to ensure they maintain connection with their support networks throughout



Andy Randerson

switchover. This includes working with local authorities and umbrella support groups to ensure providers can reach all customers impacted by the changes.

For business end customers KCOM has seen a gradual move to IP services over the last few years and it's essential this momentum is maintained and encouraged. Business customers through our CP partners use a wide range of products and we've embarked on a far reaching 'discovery phase' to assess the impact of all-IP migrations to the end business.

As all network providers are no doubt aware - this transformation is a huge challenge fraught with implications for almost every aspect of their customer base.

So the first question perhaps should be - why do it at all? What are the benefits?

Well, as well as providing the best possible end customer experience including faster speeds and a more reliable service, transition to fibre also supports our commitment to reduce the environmental impact of our business and contribute to net-zero. Copper uses far more energy than fibre and is far more likely to fail. Finding replacement parts and the engineers with the skills to fix broken copper networks are also increasingly rare.

There's much to consider as the industry approaches this huge, era-defining change. There will no doubt be many obstacles along the way but living through arguably an era defining change where one technology gives way to another will certainly make for interesting times ahead.

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Viatel chief exec expands

Viatel is approaching an expansion milestone as it seeks to establish a strong presence in the UK and Europe, according to CEO Paul Rellis.

The leadership approach and ethos that enabled Rellis to secure high profile roles at Microsoft remain unchanged and are paying even greater dividends as Viatel enters international expansion mode. Rellis' early interest in technology drew him to Microsoft where he was appointed EMEA Finance Director for Operations in 2000. Seven years later he became CEO for Microsoft Ireland before climbing the ranks to COO for the software giant's EMEA division. "My 17 years with Microsoft coincided with the company's critical transition from a traditional software vendor into a cloud-based entity, and I oversaw the establishment of some of its major data centres in Dublin," said Rellis.

After leaving Microsoft, Rellis invested in a business he judged to be inherently strong with great potential – Viatel – which was formed by Digiweb (Irish residential telecom operator) founder Colm Piercy in 2013 when he acquired the European assets of the original American incarnation of the business. A new direction was set when Rellis became CEO in 2018 with a strategy to establish an Irish and European focused

business comms, cloud and cyber security provider.

"Over the last four years we have seen significant growth and developed our digital provider capability on top of the classic ISP business," added Rellis. "Viatel will multiply in size in the next three to five years and we are keen to expand our international footprint overseas. An international network and transatlantic data centre facilities underpin our global capabilities and ambitions. The UK is an obvious target, but Viatel is also considering longer range opportunities in Western Europe."

Following considerable organic growth and a series of acquisitions Viatel now employs over 275 people with locations throughout Ireland. Revenues for 2022 are expected to reach 70 million euros, generated from over 4,700 companies including many household names and global brands. Viatel's customer base spans many industries but it is notably strong in the financial services, healthcare and retail sectors.

According to Rellis, in recent years Viatel has been characterised as much by agility and diversification as



Paul Rellis

Viatel will multiply in size in the next three to five years and we are keen to expand our international footprint overseas

rapid growth. "Following a series of bolt-on acquisitions of other telecoms providers, our acquisition of ActionPoint in early 2022 lifted us firmly into the software services and digital transformation space," he added. "Operating in a technical marketplace means that platforms, products and opportunities are constantly evolving. While traditional telecommunications

providers have a reputation for intransigence, we take great pride in our agility and our ability to react to opportunities in the market. Our innovations are never isolated. They are proactive responses to the issues our customers face every day."

Rellis observed that more and more businesses welcome the leading-edge technology and

standardisation that global players have deployed, but they hate the downsides of that standardisation. "The demands on businesses are so intense that they need the support and innovation that local tech companies can provide," he commented. "They are closer to their markets, understand customers' real needs and are more

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s his horizons

responsive. There is a huge opportunity to consolidate brilliant local tech support organisations and provide these services at scale."

Key partners

But no single company can deliver the entire digital service so Viatel partners with a select group of strategic technology players such as Microsoft, Cisco, Veam and VMWare. "Any new products we consider all have a common trait – we're not selling technology,

There is a huge opportunity to consolidate brilliant local tech support organisations and provide their services at scale

we're selling a service that is more important than the technology underneath," said Rellis.

"For example, the rate of digital transformation, cloud migrations and remote working accelerated during the pandemic at a pace beyond the wildest of ambitious IT strategies. We serviced our customers' needs while adapting to new working practices.

"Viatel demonstrated that we are responsive in a crisis and resilient in maintaining services, despite the significant increase in demand on our networks. The telecoms industry has a terrible reputation for customer service. Viatel is working hard to be an

outlier and challenge that perception with every single customer interaction."

Given the upsides of tech for business and Viatel's pedigree it is fair to say that the company is pushing against an ever opening door. "Digital transformation helps businesses to grow, acquire new customers and manage their bottom line," added Rellis. "Who doesn't want that? Many companies source their comms and network infrastructure from incumbent providers and were reluctant to move despite non-competitive pricing and poor service. But the Covid era and soaring inflation have made many organisations more cost-conscious and aware of their service needs. This change in attitude opens doors for Viatel as an alternative, proactive partner. The market is ripe for disruption."

With the bit between his teeth Rellis is energetically pursuing an assiduously planned growth strategy yet he never loses sight of the basics. "I intend to continue to do job number one really well – grow organically quarter on quarter – supported by acquisition opportunities," he stated. "Another priority is creating the right environment where our people can do their best work helping, supporting and advising customers. Happy people in our organisation make our customers happier. By earning the trust and respect of our customers we win more of their portfolios and we retain our relationships. It's good business for everyone." ■

Just a minute with Paul Rellis...

Role model: My Dad. His advice was always to not get too excited when things are going well, nor too down when things are going not so well. Sound advice for these times!

What talent do you wish you had? To sing.

What do you fear most? Singing live.

Tell us something about yourself we don't know: I'm an avid traveller and have visited more than 50 countries.

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

Name three ideal dinner guests: George Harrison, an exceptional songwriter with stories about being a Beatle; Sir Roger Bannister to find out more about how he became the first person to run a sub-four minute mile; and Ella Fitzgerald to sing a song or two with that great voice.

Your main strength and what could you work on? I'm strong at setting direction and mobilising people, but could work on not being so easily distracted and losing concentration. I find it increasingly hard to stay in the moment and keep focused.

Best piece of advice you have been given? It's all about the people.

The biggest challenge facing the ICT channel? Talent is always a challenge in the tech space.

Your first job? I qualified as a Chartered Accountant and joined Coca-Cola as an auditor in the early 1990s.

What possession could you not live without? My Spotify account.

How do you relax when not working? I enjoy running, cycling and watching live sports, and I'm a big music guy.

Energy partnership very special for VIP

The Hull based VIP Communications Group of Companies is a leading provider of mobile communications products and services across the UK and prides itself on giving exceptional customer service and offering all its clients a bespoke billing analysis service. Over the last 27 years, VIP has built up a very strong customer base and love the longevity of business relationships which coincide with the company's brand motto, 'We're not just in a partnership, we're building relationships'.

Five years ago, the company began working alongside Fidelity Energy, so we quizzed Director Chris Spinks about how the partnership has developed since it began in 2017, and why offering customers energy procurement services has been so beneficial to VIP's business.

What was the thinking behind the Fidelity Energy partnership?

Becoming an energy partner was a complete 'no brainer' for us. The main reason we added energy to our portfolio was our client base. We have built strong business relationships and felt that the offering of energy would be a great way to make customers stickier. Ultimately they trust us, so there's no real sell in this at all.

Over the years what support has Fidelity Energy provided?

The onboarding process with Fidelity is seamless. The team is always on hand for any training or if advice is needed. We have our own internal account manager who gives us day-to-day help with everything that we need to get deals done and over the line and training is always there if we need it.

Do you get any help with your own marketing?

Absolutely. The webinar's that Fidelity organises are very helpful to keep you up to speed with the latest market news and trends and the marketing support we get from their marketing manager Ilesha is also great.

Has your energy offering matured over the years?

The team at VIP has progressed since first onboarding and becoming a partner of Fidelity Energy over five years ago. When we first started selling energy, we sold it to existing customers. We have now got to the point where people outside of our bubble are enquiring or asking us to procure their energy contracts. We have a



VIP Communications Director
Chris Spinks

separate page on our website and the energy part of our business very much has its own identity. The future for VIP selling energy is bright, as we continue to build our relationship with Fidelity and customers alike.

Did Covid have any impact on your business?

VIP experienced huge highs as well as struggles when the pandemic hit, but it played a massive part in everybody's lives, so it was no different for us. We very much like to be out and about, doing our business face-to-face, attending events and being visible. The pandemic reduced the amount we could do this and like everyone else we had to do all our business in front of a computer screen. Nothing is better than buying from people and to do that you have to be with people. COVID stopped that and this was evident to see in our sales activity.

With energy in your portfolio, have you been able to cross sell?

We have achieved some great success selling energy. It has bolstered the commercials that we can offer a customer at the time of mobile renewal. As an example, we secured the electricity of a big manufacturing company and won their mobile renewal because we were able to offer a larger kit fund through the commercials earned on the Energy contracts!

Has the Fidelity Energy partnership benefited VIP financially?

It certainly has! Since adding energy to our portfolio, we have seen some real financial gain. The different payment terms from the suppliers really helps with our business model. We love working with Fidelity Energy and hope our partnership will continue to develop and bring us even better financial gains in the future.

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ICUK innovates in VoIP

ICUK's product development and innovation prowess is thundering into view again with the launch of a new VoIP platform that Director Paul Barnett says delivers a genuine breakthrough.

Creating winning products that empower and enable partners is core to ICUK's success and its new VoIP platform continues the innovation theme that has defined the business since it began its commercial life in 2001, established by Barnett and Leslie Costar who were school friends with a shared interest in computing and networks. The company then resold dial-up Internet from CIX (which was formally owned by Legal & General, Telnor and Pipex and acquired by ICUK in 2011) and went on to resell broadband, web hosting and traditional telephony. "We hated every second of that experience," stated Barnett. "We were rebadging another service and when it came to in-life support we had no visibility or control."

It became obvious to Barnett and Costar that product development and innovation would create a competitive advantage and ICUK has taken a refreshing approach ever since. "We decided to mis-spend our youth on developing the platforms that didn't exist for resellers," added Barnett. "We built our own network and started working with carriers

directly for connectivity. Fast forward 21 years and our control panel is regarded by some as the best in the industry. We offer a single unified control panel, fully developed by in-house developers that gives our army of 850-plus resellers the ability to resell, rebrand and support connectivity, telecommunications and web hosting services."

The control panel has been key since day one. It allows staff, resellers and their end users to see and interact with ICUK's services with a high degree of confidence. "By empowering others, and sharing information, we have not felt the need to replicate the large teams that our competition have amassed," commented Barnett. "Some of the world's largest companies and brands have bought into this philosophy and we are supporting their communication requirements."

ICUK has a small team of experts largely focused on development and technical support. There are no sales staff nor account managers, so development rates are relentless and primarily driven by feedback from its growing reseller base.



Paul Barnett

Development rates are relentless and primarily driven by feedback from our reseller base

"Development-wise we have been split across existing platform progression as well as building our in-house VoIP platform, and sowing the seeds of other projects," said Barnett.

Strong pedigree

ICUK has been successful with WLR3, being one of only a handful of directly integrated parties with no dependency on third party integrators. "Ensuring that we could offer our WLR base a proposition to move their lines and calls too was a logical step for us," added Barnett. "As with all our platforms there is an internal reluctance to simply resell or rebadge another solution. What you are

seeing is very much an ICUK product first and foremost."

Much feedback from ICUK's existing base, combined with competitor analysis, went into the VoIP platform's design. "The thought processes were staggering," explained Barnett. "As a new entrant to this space, and with a blank sheet, we wanted to ensure our solution addressed the frustrations experienced by resellers using other VoIP platforms. By putting fixes in place we could quickly form a tick list as to why our platform may be selected over more established entrants.

"Furthermore, we didn't want VoIP to be a burden

on our support team. The design had to be intuitive and inviting, and in doing so we wanted to deliver something that wasn't met with 'how do I...?' type questions. We have met those aims. Less than two months since launch we had over 2,000 subscribers and not once have we had a reseller ask for training sessions, or a request to be walked through the process. This is testament to our design philosophies."

Copious efforts are now being made towards launching an API for the VoIP platform, an in-house developed softphone and Teams integration. The company is also assessing mobile data solutions to sit in its connectivity portfolio, complementing existing technologies and providing opportunities linked to the WLR switch off.

ICUK can rightfully claim a distinct pedigree, and its rich and innovative heritage has become a hallmark. "We continue to design intuitive and advanced wholesale platforms for communications and connectivity," commented Barnett. "They were started from the ground up, often adopting difficult paths to market, but what we have is genuinely innovative. We very much enjoy what we do and have built a great loyal team who share our enthusiasm.

"We are independent, debt free and have no external parties influencing our future. Our success will continue as long as we remain true to our long-held philosophies. We enjoy being a small team and have no ambitions to replicate the call centre culture too often adopted by our competition." ■

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Bramley outlines Croft's

Croft Communications CEO Mark Bramley on why today's ICT market dynamics call for a broader take on service provision, and how his expanding horizons, supported by multiple acquisitions and a particular brand of leadership, are helping to build resilience as an MSP.

The success of many businesses depends on the timing with which its leaders execute their strategies – and Bramley exemplifies timely entrepreneurialism. In late 2019 he saw an opportunity to invest in a business (which became Croft Communications soon after) alongside long-time friend Ben Page. Bramley's prior experience was in the financial technology market, leading the growth of several FinTech organisations.

The biggest business risk he had taken was leaving a secure London position and moving to New York City shortly after 9/11 to run a fledgling Fin-Tech firm. But there was no such risk factor in 2019 with confidence underpinned by past experience. "Ben and I thought we could build a business based on our combined skill set," said Bramley.

Croft Communications began its commercial life in 2008, then known as Mobile Account Solutions and operating as a T-Mobile B2B mobile reseller, later expanding into UC sales. "Following an MBO in November 2019 we rebranded as Croft in early 2020 and executed a buy-and-build strategy to grow our customer base, product and geographic exposure," added Bramley.

To say that the MBO catalysed a no holds barred shopping spree would be to understate the nature of Bramley's acquisitive appetite. To date, Croft has acquired 13 businesses and grown from 16 people to 85 across seven physical offices. Revenue has ballooned from under £7 million to more than £17 million, generated from a customer base that comprises the largest UK blue chip companies through to many



Mark Bramley

Ultimately, telecoms is a specialist sub-sector of the IT industry and more buyers will treat it as such

sole practitioners. Croft has over 4,000 business customers located around the UK and Europe.

Managed services

"We are continuing to expand through our buy-and-build strategy with healthy organic growth," added Bramley. "We will also continue to significantly

invest in IT managed services. Customers are increasingly looking for vendors that can service more of their business challenges, rather than simply buying products from a broad range of specialist companies. This is the main driver behind our expansion of products and services over the last three years. We're continuing to deepen

our capabilities across all areas of IT managed services and are determined to stay ahead of the needs and demands of our customers."

The biggest factor defining customer demand is the accelerating merger of telecoms and IT, believes Bramley, along with the blurring of the lines between

MSP transition

a mobile phone and a traditional phone system. "It is crystal clear that customers are looking to reduce the number of vendors they rely on," he added. "Ultimately, telecoms is a specialist sub-sector of the IT industry and more buyers will treat it as such. Inevitably, the market will continue to consolidate and the lines between IT and telecoms will ultimately disappear. This change will be the catalyst for significant upheaval in the IT and telecoms world."

The biggest technology changes reiterated by Bramley not only relate to the convergence of comms

I constantly refer back to my mistakes when planning for the future. Mistakes are simply the best learning tools we have

and IT – greater adoption of MDM functionality and a focus on the cyber protection of an ever more mobile workforce also blips large on his radar screen. Against this evolving backdrop, Bramley's expansion plan is to 'act local, think national'. "There are many companies in the IT and telecoms arena but very few national providers," he added. "As companies and people get more mobile we see our national presence as a particular strategic advantage."

Bramley also noted that the competitive landscape means resellers need to differentiate

by providing value for money and an ever-improving service. "VARs need real in-house expertise rather than just be box shifters or glorified sales agents," he stated. "Recruiting, training and retaining talent is a big challenge but vital to maintaining customer loyalty. We will continue to add geography, talented people and interesting solutions for our customers."

Bramley makes no secret of the fact that he has made mistakes during his career and he embraces these miscalculations as a rite of passage to wisdom.

"Mistakes are invaluable life and business lessons," he added. "I constantly refer back to my mistakes when planning for the future. Mistakes are simply the best learning tools that we have. I learn fast and have a broad range of knowledge with expertise in nothing. This helps in decision making. Expertise can be a curse."

There is no mistaking Bramley's determination to continue navigating the evolving ICT landscape, and his own brand of uncluttered decision making will no doubt ensure Croft's ongoing resilience. "We will carry on growing at a decent clip, focusing on delivering exceptional customer service in the belief that this will create opportunities," he commented. "Alongside this, we are continually looking for good client-obsessed businesses to add to the Croft group and we expect to make many more acquisitions in the years ahead." ■

Just a minute with Mark Bramley...

Role model: My Dad and Grandad who permeate everything I do. And Cyril Nash, my first boss in 1986 who taught me so much about professional life.

What talent do you wish you had? To write a book.

What do you fear most? Stasis. I need constant change – it's challenging and exciting.

Tell us something about yourself we don't know: I'm an enthusiastic, and occasionally successful, poker player.

If you weren't in ICT what would you be doing? Playing poker in Las Vegas.

Name three ideal dinner guests: Jeff Bezos, his 'fail quickly' approach inspired me when I first read about it, and to understand more about his origins; Geoff Boycott, a fellow Yorkshireman and my childhood idol; and Anthony Bourdain, an amazing chef and great story teller.

Name one thing you couldn't do without in your job? Caffeine.

One example of something you have overcome: As an impetuous 18-year-old, dropping out of university in a fit of pique. This could easily have hurt my career but I eventually turned it into a benefit.

Your main strength and what could you work on? My strong point is an ability to learn the key aspects of a subject quickly. My weakness is being an organisational disaster. I thrive on deadlines, but can't function at my best unless I'm under time pressure.

Industry bugbear? Jargon! We need less complexity and more empathy for the customer experience.

Best piece of advice you have been given? Don't sweat the small stuff.

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Aryaka scales up UK channel

American network security company Aryaka has ramped up its UK channel activities and the man at the centre of its expansion strategy is Channel Sales Director for UK & Northern Europe Gary Read – a proven go-getter well known for delivering on expectations.

Read expects Aryaka's UK business to hit £500 million in annual recurring revenue over the coming three years by expanding its sales team and partner ecosystem. "We're doubling headcount this year and bringing on 100 partners through our master agents," he stated. "Looking at Aryaka as an entity, I also expect us to be recognised as a top three SD-WAN/SASE vendor."

Read identified determination as his greatest strength and having gone 13 years without missing a target the channel would be wise to take note of his intentions. "The hybrid workplace is the biggest opportunity in the UK and globally," he added. "Just like the rush for businesses to publish websites in the 2000s or get a social media presence in the 2010s, businesses are now racing to secure and optimise their networks so that hybrid working can become business as usual. Before that can happen, security, network optimisation and a cloud-first

approach need to be deeply embedded into IT strategic planning, allowing for seamless movement between on-premise and remote locations. That's where Aryaka can support true business transformation."

The rise of remote working has prompted the need for a new approach to network security, and Secure Access Service Edge (SASE) is a network architecture that unites cloud security technologies with WANs. "While the SASE moniker has only emerged in the last few years the underlying need that has driven the trend has existed for decades," added Read. "As enterprises have embraced the cloud, legacy architectures like MPLS haven't proven to be flexible, cloud-native or cost-effective. Before enterprises abandon the hub-and-spoke model and truly embrace the cloud, they need assurances that data remains private and secure. As confidence grows, and hybrid working becomes even more commonplace, SASE will become an integral



Gary Read

Businesses are now racing to secure and optimise their networks so that hybrid working can become business as usual

factor in every enterprise WAN deployment."

Relationship building

Read first encountered SD-WAN while working for VMWare where he focused on relationship building and signed its first global contract worth over £45 million. This deal caught Aryaka's eye and Steve Harrington – formerly of Masergy and TalkTalk

Business, now Managing Director for Aryaka in EMEA – approached Read with an opportunity to drive Aryaka's UK expansion.

The UK operation is now laser-focused on increasing sales potential by breaking into more industries and finding more routes to market via master agents and sub-agents. "Moving from

a consultative approach to something more scalable has been especially significant," explained Read. "We've learnt how we can better support partners, and their reseller agents, with a simplified channel experience and a simple product.

"Originally, we worked through a number of consultants but the results

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nel ambitions

weren't scalable. About 18 months ago we started rethinking our partnership model and focused more on partnerships with multinational VARs and MSPs such as Deutsche Telecom. A partner like Lloyds Consultancy Group or DT typically provides up to 20 leads per quarter, as opposed to half that in a year through a consultant. We've been able to scale quickly by building better relationships."

High potential

Aryaka is currently working primarily with two master agents in the UK, Avant and Telarus, helping them and their reseller partners

We revised our partnership model to focus more on multinational VARs and MSPs. We're able to scale quickly by building better relationships

to scale. "The scope here is phenomenal," added Read. "Through our new master agent initiatives we've more than doubled revenue compared to 2020, and as an international entity, Aryaka is going from strength to strength, growing headcount from 500 to 600 this year alone."

Growth in part can be attributed to the chip shortage still affecting supply, making SD-WAN a more virtual offering and relying less on hardware. "This reduces total cost of

ownership and brings better scalability and flexibility to end users, enabling more nuanced customisation through software rather than physical devices," stated Read. "5G and incorporating mobile data pathways is another key function we're exploring with carriers, especially as failovers and to better secure remote workers."

Aryaka also keeps a close eye on competitors, learning from their wins and losses while also listening to customers and delivering on their feedback. "It's like the tortoise and hare race," said Read. "We may not be first with a new functionality but we're watching the market to make sure features are relevant and worth investing in before considering the best way to bake them into our portfolio."

Read also pointed out that having 'five nines' uptime on Aryaka's global L2 core is an indicator of how seriously Aryaka takes its reliability. "Level 3 resellers don't want

to expose their operations to risk by overpromising the quality of network management and security tools," commented Read.

"And even though enterprises are far more aware of the need for robust security, translating cost into value is still a steep hill to climb. "That's where educating partners on the value of an optimised, cloud-first network comes in. We address those educational challenges while removing fears around overpromising the value of solutions." ■

Just a minute with Gary Read...

Role model: Robin Williams: He was so energetic, passionate and could light up a room with a smile.

Your main strength and what could you work on?

My greatest strength is determination. But having gone 13 years without missing a target I take more satisfaction in mentoring. I'm working on listening more to my team and understanding that a debate isn't an argument.

If you weren't in ICT what would you be doing? I run a podcast on the side, so I'd be investing my time in that. I love interviewing athletes and entertainment personalities to learn about their mentality and perspective on life.

Tell us something about yourself we don't know:

I once got flown to New York for a dinner and back, and got to share the red carpet with Rita Ora and Alexandra Daddario, chatted for some time and had the paparazzi in a frenzy over 'who is this guy'.

Three ideal dinner guests: Robin Williams, he'd be the life of the party; Ricky Gervais would be a laugh a second; and Bob Marley for music.

One example of something you have overcome: I used to be afraid of flying. But after regular trips to Silicon Valley, Africa and elsewhere it's no longer such an issue.

How do you relax? I unwind by carp fishing. There's no distraction and the silence helps me decompress, think through whatever's on my mind and hopefully land a big catch in the meantime.

What talent do you wish you had? To be multilingual. It's the best way to bring us all closer together.

Top tip for resellers: Always be honest with your vendor and advise them on how best they should work with you.

THE RECRUITMENT COLUMN

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Risky Business



Darrol Stevens and Ollie Benn

2022 has been very driven in the world of recruitment.

We have seen candidates with more options than ever before, with salary expectations increasing dramatically. It seems like there has never been a tougher time to hire the talent needed within the ICT sector.

In the main, despite the challenges everyone has faced when hiring, companies haven't changed their expectations by much. Most have accepted the fact that if you want the best talent, you need to pay more for it. But the expectations around qualification, experience, culture fit etc haven't changed. Maybe they shouldn't.

However, it has to be said that there is a real opportunity to engage and attract the best talent for your business, but only if you are willing to be somewhat flexible during the hiring process.

Some of our clients have hired candidates with less experience based on their personality or culture fit with their businesses. Others have changed their expectations around the requirement for certain

qualifications & certifications. Businesses have needed to adapt to the demands of the candidate, whereas in the past it's been the opposite. If anything, the recruitment of new blood has perhaps changed and is now more considered. Companies are thinking about the value add of a candidate, their personality fit, drive and ambitions, rather than whether they just tick the boxes on the job spec.

This approach is all about hiring the right person over the most qualified. It makes more sense to hire the right personality fit and train them than to hire the wrong fit just because of their experience or qualifications. This flexibility has worked well for those who embrace being agile in a tough candidate market. Not all companies are showing such innovation around hiring.

Many are just getting used to paying higher salaries and are not willing to change their candidate expectations. Sadly, they are usually the companies that are struggling the most to hire.

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Akixi reinvents Insights a

Following a six month period of strategic reinvention Akixi has made a commitment to revive BroadWorks hosted telephony implementations in its partner base (resellers and service providers) with a free Akixi Insights offer while making it easy for them to demonstrate the full value of analytics to their customers.

Akixi has also swung its focus onto helping SMBs reinvent their customer interactions through analytics and insights. And to kick start this new strategic approach the company is illuminating what's possible with its just launched Light Up The Base campaign. Here, Head of Product and Solutions, Colin Gill, and VP of International Sales, Paul Holden shine a light on why Akixi's simplified real-time analytics is a game changer for end users and channel partners...



Colin Gill

With positive feedback from the resellers and service providers that have already begun the Light Up The Base journey, we have already made a good start

The launch of Light Up The Base follows a six month period of restructuring and refocusing that saw the appointment of Craig Decker as CEO, who formerly led the cloud organisation at Cisco. Akixi also secured PE from Axiom and strategic investment from True North Advisory, and plans to grow revenue x10 and expand in international markets. Achieving its target rests largely on a simplified portfolio – Akixi Insights – along with a change in market approach and removing barriers (no upfront fees) to make it easier for service providers and resellers to trial and sell Akixi to their customers.

“Since the acquisition we are fully focusing our approach,

portfolio development, and customer/partner engagement around growth on a scale never dreamed of before,” stated Gill. “We aim to achieve this through a number of initiatives, such as striking a balance between users getting the full value from Akixi with minimum effort and being able to sell, deploy and support the product easily at scale.”

Gill explained that the proposition has evolved to increase the emphasis around Akixi's value for resellers

and service providers. “For example, increasing the customer lifetime value through providing a differentiated portfolio and increasing relevance to their customers, in turn helping them to reduce churn and increase retention, and of course on top of that comes an increase in revenue,” he added.

Holden also noted that since Axiom's acquisition the priority has been to make Akixi easy to consume. “This has been achieved

by removing the grit of adoption while developing a sales campaign that drives scale and creates value for partners, supporting their retention of existing customers to reduce churn, and a platform for top line revenue growth by helping provide relevance and differentiation to help secure net new business,” he stated.

The opportunity for resellers is impressive, especially as SMB companies face many challenges, none more damaging than losing opportunities to the competition. “Akixi empowers SMBs to capture as many calls and serve as many customers as they can, by providing insight on when customers are trying to contact them, and ensuring the right amount of people are in the right place at the right time to make sure no opportunity is lost to their competitors,” explained Gill. “And for those times where callers do slip through the net, Akixi provides the visibility and functionality to recapture those qualified callers in real-time.”

Holden identified that the biggest challenge for SMBs is not knowing when they are missing calls, which are either a qualified buyer (a lost potential sale) or an existing customer (failed customer service). “Voice is still the major communication

channel in the SMB market,” he said. “Voice calls are devalued when you have no data to understand if your business has a problem. Akixi overcomes this issue by collecting the data in real-time, then presenting the facts (lost calls report) in a simple way, and in real-time for immediate action.”

According to Gill, from a product point of view Akixi's priority with the Light Up the Base programme is to support the sales teams within its service provider and reseller network to deliver the programme at scale. “The concept of the Light Up the Base programme is as simple as it is powerful, and as a result we have already had very positive interest from our partners,” he explained. “Ensuring the programme runs smoothly and Akixi partners and end users have a good experience is paramount. With positive feedback from the resellers and service providers that have already begun the Light

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and Lights Up The Base

up the base journey, we have already made a good start."

Holden noted that the timing of the Light up the Base programme's launch is in line with the execution of Akixi's global expansion to increase market penetration globally. "The first few months since Axiom, True North and Craig came on board have been spent removing the grit, simplifying the product, making it easier to provision and consume, and supporting our partners, existing and net new, with the data to execute their sales strategy," he said.

Akixi also provides an opportunity for partners at every point of the sales cycle, explained Gill. "Through the Light Up the Base programme, Akixi provides partners with an opportunity to upsell their solution stack to their existing customer base, creating additional recurring revenue and making their customers more sticky, ready for when the next contract renewal comes round," he commented. "It's at the point of renewal where Akixi plays its part again. Having provided the service provider with opportunities to attract new customers and increase revenue, it's at the point of renewal where Akixi can provide relevance.

"Through solving even more of the customer's current problems, the service provider is more likely to keep the customer and stop them



Paul Holden

Voice calls are devalued when you have no data to understand if your business has a problem

moving to a competitor, resulting in reduced churn and increased retention rates. However, this also results in the renewal being less about cost and more about providing a full stack solution, further increasing the customer lifetime value."

Holden observed that most business owners these days prefer to make data-led, evidence-based decisions, which means that demand is high for real-time actionable data consumed in a simple digestible way. "Our strategy aligns to these demands and gives relevance to our partners, helping them differentiate from the competition while supporting the go-to-market to increase the life time value of the

customer," he said. "The big opportunity is to collect data with no financial risk, use the evidence to demonstrate the customer has a problem and that they have a solution, which then turns into billable revenue while adding value to the customer who in turn becomes more sticky. Customer value is in empowering the sales and CX."

New work model

Gill emphasised that Akixi's strength also plays to a remote or hybrid workforce, and with many companies now transitioning to these working models on a permanent basis, and at an unprecedented pace, the need to analyse the workforce's productivity has never been greater. "But above that, Akixi also enables and empowers remote workers and teams to see what is happening in real-time and act immediately to not only recapture lost callers, but also to prevent callers from being lost in the

first place," stated Gill. "All of which, when Akixi is fully utilised across a dispersed or hybrid workforce, enables a company to serve more customers."

Being able to analyse the customer's call journey to highlight pain points or measure KPIs to providing consistent and good customer service is vital in keeping today's customers happy when it comes to new and repeat business, reiterated Gill. "Customer service has always been a key differentiator for companies," he added. "However, consumers are more savvy and demanding than ever and will vote with their feet if they experience poor service. It is important that service providers make customer experience a strong part of the messaging when talking about the value that Akixi brings."

Akixi's short to medium-term roadmap focuses heavily on simplifying all aspects of its solutions. From providing an improved out-of-the-box experience and value for new users, to simplifying the deployment for partners, everything is

geared towards not just making the product easier to use, but making it easier to get out of the door too.

"We are including many features that also increase the relevance of Akixi Insights to the user, making sure we talk in their language," added Gill. "We are not just making the reporting and language relevant to specific sectors: Different verticals gain different value from having insight into their caller activity, and we are working hard to make sure we clearly demonstrate the value of Akixi to all users. We are of course driven by our partners and end user customers, so the roadmap continues to include many requested features and functions."

Holden emphasised that the economic outlook makes it more important than ever to help customers never lose a sale or lose a client. "Data enables business decisions on fact, not gut feel," he stated. "Every business needs to be efficient and productive to control costs and maximise return. We are less tolerant as a society and our CX expectations are at an all time high." ■

LOST CALLS RECOUPED BY CHICKEN RESTAURANT

HAVING adapted its business model to include a takeaway service, this chain of UK chicken restaurants knew it was losing calls for take outs, but didn't know how many or where. With an average order valued at £19.20, it was important to capture every call. With Akixi, this UK restaurant chain discovered it was losing 60 per cent of calls into its takeaway business, resulting in tens of thousands of pounds in lost revenue every day! The company used Akixi to analyse the customer call journey, identify where calls were being lost, and put KPIs in place. It took a few attempts to get it right, but each time an adjustment was made to the call journey they used Akixi to measure the improvements until they perfected their call routing.

"This has been one of the quickest and most seamless mass-provisioning projects I've carried out to date. Even I am surprised at how quickly we have managed to turn around and get this campaign up and running. The experience has been very positive and straight forward."
NICK HUNT, TECHNICAL MANAGER, RHM TELECOMMUNICATIONS
 • Akixi Insights case study:
<https://www.akixi.com/case-studies/rhm-akixi-insights/>

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Time to rethink billing

Are you thinking about your billing operation strategically? If not, take heed of Tekton Director Harry McKeever who argues that it's prime time to future proof billing platforms and capitalise on them as centres of operational excellence.

Exponential data usage and the adoption of new technologies presents resellers with a rare opportunity to truly differentiate through the solutions they offer and how easily end users can manage those services. And according to McKeever these new market dynamics provide fertile ground for resellers to take a long-term view of their telecoms billing strategy. "Whether your reasoning is a better customer experience or to stay in line with Ofcom's recent regulation changes, now is the time for resellers to imagine the future of their billing," he stated.

McKeever noted that it's becoming easy for users to rip through large amounts of mobile data when you consider the significant uptake of 5G and home working, new high bandwidth consumer products like VR and 4K streaming, as well as businesses moving significant resources to the cloud. "Obviously, these new technologies will bring new connectivity and communication services to the fore – bolt-ons for

protected low-latency VR connections, possibly?" stated McKeever. "Furthermore, bundles and shared data pools can help businesses – and consumers in some respects – take more control over their data usage and help resellers attract new customers, but only if they have the visibility and ability to customise their services to manage them effectively."

Towards the end of last year Ofcom's first of two planned changes went live with three noteworthy aspects to consider: Resellers must now help consumers and small enterprise customers manage their usage and spend on communications services, as well as providing a way of monitoring and controlling their use. They should also give consumers and small enterprise customers timely information on tariff usage and notify customers when allowances have been used up. Thirdly, as well as provide consumers and small enterprise customers with additional information on their usage they need the ability to set usage limits (either financial or volume-related).



Harry McKeever

"These changes mean that offering this functionality is not just for the end user's benefit," added McKeever. "If a reseller wants to minimise the risk of fines and damaged credibility they must offer this functionality or feel Ofcom's wrath. We were shocked at the number of resellers who reached out to us after discovering their legacy billing solutions were non-compliant with the recent Ofcom updates."

Subscription model

As stakeholders in end user operations look for more long-term flexibility, especially in opex solutions, McKeever observed that many businesses are gravitating to subscription style services with plenty of inclusive usage. "Not only do these safeguard precious resource for investment in other aspects of the business, but financing is more predictable

and service management is typically much more streamlined too," he said.

"As bundled services become more common users tend to fall out of the habit of keeping an eye on their expenditure, expecting costs to remain stable. This is why it's so important that end users can set and manage usage or spend alerts, setting bars if they wish for an added layer of protection in case they do exceed their allocations."

While overage costs are a lucrative revenue boost for channel businesses McKeever argues that a customer with control over their own costs and who keeps within budget would be more profitable in the long run, and less likely to turn to another provider after a few months of un-anticipated additional data costs.

"All told, the state of flux the channel finds itself in is the perfect time for introspection and future planning," commented McKeever. "The modern requirement for high levels of end user management make it the right time to assess the functionality of existing billing platforms and whether they can help businesses grow through the next decade."

Returning to the point of market differentiation, McKeever noted that the billing experience is often overlooked when organisations explore ways to set themselves apart from their contenders. But with the right feature set, billing can be used to a reseller's advantage, enriching the customer experience and differentiating the reseller through elements such as portal power, advanced reporting to maximise revenue, automation and critical self-serve functions.

"Billing can be the make or break of a telecoms company," added McKeever. "Get your margins and service right and you'll have happy customers for decades. Get it wrong and churn rates get too high and customer service teams get swamped by angry customers, leading to more discounts and gestures and promotions that further erode profitability."

"With the correct billing software resellers can be confident that their billing platform not only enhances customers' perception of their operation, but also helps keep their team on track for each and every bill run. In turn, this means that margins are maximised and any loss making services get resolved before it's too late." ■



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Terry O'Brien, CEO of Digital Wholesale Solutions, commented: "Another record entry is great news for our industry. This demonstrates the innovation, drive and power of our amazing channel and I can't wait to celebrate with all the finalists in London on October 13th. The event is the highlight event of the year and I hope individuals and companies, regardless of whether they have been shortlisted or not, will attend and acknowledge everything that is great about the ICT Channel."

Another record entry has been announced for the 2022 Comms National Awards, reflecting the ongoing success of resellers providing solutions to customers and the companies that support and serve them in the UK ICT channel.

over the last year. Due to the quantity of entries received, the largest ever panel of judges has been assembled as Comms Dealer Editorial Director Nigel Sergent confirmed.

The awards process, organised by Comms Dealer publisher BPL Business Media and sponsored by Digital Wholesale Solutions, has been staged annually for over 20 years and recognises resellers, vendors, distributors, network providers and service providers that have excelled in their delivery of innovative products and services

"In the current economic climate, we expected a drop in entries this year, so to receive a record of nearly 200 is astonishing. As a result, we have called upon our largest ever panel of industry experts with broad experience across the channel spectrum, who have all committed to our strict criteria and will judge the submissions diligently without fear or favour."



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Channel is taking big steps on the march to net zero



The long summer heatwave which caused serious droughts and devastating wildfires across Europe, brings into focus the talk given by Zen Internet CEO Paul Stobart at Comms Vision last November when he issued an ultimatum to the channel leaders assembled on the important issue of climate change and net zero planning.



PHOTO BY MARKUS SPISKE

His simple message was this: “We could all choose to reduce emissions by half from tomorrow. There will be costs and implications involved – but if we don’t, our grandchildren will not forgive us. You’ve got to measure very accurately what you are emitting.” Ten months on, with global and domestic issues taking over the headlines, channel leaders could be forgiven for focussing on more pressing problems – like managing the price rises forced onto customers by soaring inflation and seeking out the right staff in a skills vacuum.

A quick round robin approach to channel businesses, including both resellers and suppliers, has revealed this is far from the case. It appears Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) is increasingly becoming top of mind for many channel directors in the light of government directives and a pressing need to be seen to be ‘doing the right things’. Indeed, top job candidates are increasingly rejecting offers from firms that have no tangible ESG structures in place.

Companies that adhere to ESG standards agree to

conduct themselves ethically and can draw on a range of strategies, tactics and sustainability solutions to do so. But with such a wide range of possible approaches and solutions, and a plethora of issues that fall under the ESG umbrella, where should organisations focus? To offer some guidance to those not clear on where to start, we asked both large and small channel organisations to provide an overview of the steps they have taken to become more sustainable and ‘greener’ operations. These are all measured, creative, and highly inspirational.



PHIL RACE, CEO, ADEPT

Adept volunteers ramping up ESG mindset

At Adept, we initially created a 17-point charter using the UN Global Compact as a framework. This provided us with an excellent structure to examine all aspects of Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) practices across our business. In turn, we created a clear and simple action plan for our team to engage with. It was a great start.

Next, we took a deeper dive into the topic of climate change. In our initial charter we declared some simple actions like using green energy and fitting low energy lighting. We felt this was a little simplistic. We have also been ‘encouraged’ to do more in this space by government. Over 50% of our business comes from the public sector, so we had to take this seriously. Government frameworks are asking us to apply more rigour and to publish a Carbon Reduction Plan.

So, what more are we doing? We now have a team of enthusiastic volunteers across

our business who are:

- Counting and weighing parcels arriving at our offices, and parcels leaving
- Measuring the carbon impact of our employees travel
- Surveying more accurately our buildings and energy use. It’s worth mentioning that we have sponsored the planting of trees with the help of the National Trust as an incentive to get volunteers to step forward.

This all means we are now measuring our carbon baseline, which will lead to us more rigorously developing ways to reduce our carbon impact, all with the intention of achieving Net Zero by 2030 – a commitment we have made on the SME Climate Hub, a very useful resource that I commend.

Finally, as an AIM listed company, our broker is providing tooling to help share our actions and progress with the investor community. I think this will become an increasing measure of the quality of a business. Watch this space.



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RICHARD BURKE, CEO, ARROW BUSINESS COMMUNICATIONS

Arrow targets net zero by end of year

There are commercial reasons too. Ever more frequently a portion of the evaluation in tender responses are allocated to a supplier's sustainability.

In January, Arrow Business Communications made a commitment to be carbon net zero by the end of the year. Committing to become carbon net zero is the 'right thing to do'; it's our moral obligation, but there are also some compelling business reasons which we believe will help us become an employer and supplier of choice.

The job market is hugely competitive and the reasons to work for a company stretch beyond salary and benefits these days. Our commitment, and the positive impact this has on our working environment, and culture all contribute to becoming an employer of choice.

Our offices, including our data centre, are the greatest contributor to our carbon usage. We have implemented a full time hybrid working policy to mitigate our carbon footprint relating to day to day commuting. Our data centre facilities are also specifically designed for resilience and energy optimisation.. Next steps include adding solar panels.

Other recent initiatives include:

- All our diesel vehicles will be replaced within six months and 75% of the fleet will be hybrid or electric within 12 months
- All our energy

- purchasing will be moved to green energy providers.
- Equipment recycling across the business including incentive schemes for customers
- Employee electric vehicles via a salary sacrifice scheme to support employees reduce their carbon usage
- Reviewing water and air sustainability

Following a review by sustainability rating specialist EcoVadis, we finished in the top 81% of companies in our sector. The main development areas for us related to more specific targets but a lot of our processes and initiatives were in line with expectations. Thanks to these initiatives, we will significantly reduce our current footprint and continue to move towards Net Zero.



ROB SIMS, CEO, ELITE GROUP

Elite commits to 90% carbon reduction

improving our sustainable practices and processes. We have engaged with a consultant to help us define our ambitions and develop a core set of metrics, by which our performance will be measured, as we look to improve the people, environment, and communities in which we live and work.

Elite is also committing to shorter-term target alongside the net zero goal. We have committed to reduce Scope 1, 2 and 3 emissions by 42% by 2030. As a first step we have had an independent consultant verify our current carbon footprint (which stands at 130 tonnes) and we are now working on the roadmap for implementing the reduction plans.

Elite's aim is to be the best business to work with and to be an employer of choice. As such, we have made commitments to our people, our community, and our environment, to ensure the success of this aim. One such commitment is to align with the UK Government's commitment to reach net zero by 2050 and so our immediate focus is on reducing Elite's carbon footprint by 90% by 2050 with a provisional allowance for residual emissions of 10% that cannot be removed from our value chain and would be off set using verified carbon removals.

Being socially and environmentally conscious, we are working on

"Examples of the steps we are taking include:

- Developing a core set of metrics, by which our performance will be measured
- Ensuring we are using green energy providers at all offices
- Transitioning the company vehicle fleet to hybrid vehicles
- Installing EV chargers at each office
- Implementing employee-based initiatives such as the cycle to work scheme and hybrid working, reducing commuting emissions
- Recycling all office and hardware waste
- Motion sensors on lighting to reduce usage
- Partnering with suppliers and brands whose values regarding the environment, charitable efforts and investing in the local community align with our own.



PAUL HOOPER, FOUNDER AND MANAGING DIRECTOR, UPLANDS

Uplands embeds 'reduce and reuse culture'

has a robust environmental policy and is committed to Net Zero Carbon by 2030, and hopefully much sooner. We operate several initiatives to support this goal, such as internal reduction, technology investment, behavioural changes, and carbon offsetting.

As business leaders and indeed tenants of this planet, we must all strive to have a more sustainable world and leave things in a better shape than when we found them.

For several years Uplands has worked with Carbon Footprint and has recognised our impact upon carbon production, and we work hard to minimise this by adopting sustainable practices as part of everything we do.

We made a commitment to our team, our customers, and partners that we would move towards achieving the UK Government Net Zero Carbon goals ahead of their time frames. Uplands

These commitments help us to build a cleaner, greener economy in line with our net zero plans and it's something our carbon conscious customers want.

As well as monitoring and reducing energy usage, our practical actions include shifting in-person meetings to MS Teams meetings, reducing travel, drastically reduced printing and introducing hybrid working which reduces travel to the office. We also audit energy consumption.

We have an ongoing conversation with our workforce, via our frequent training sessions, regarding the environmental impact of our activities and ways in which they can help reduce them, both in and outside of the workplace.

Reduce, re-use and recycle is embedded in our company ethos. We only travel for business, when necessary, we use secure cloud applications instead of printing documents, we use energy efficient appliances, and we switch them off during non-work hours.

Uplands also supports a tree planting scheme, using this to help offset carbon. We recognise our team's outstanding service or contribution, and plant trees for that as well. it's a simple yet important thing we should all be doing.



MATTHEW PARKER, CEO, BABBLE

Babble keeps its sustainable aims on track

These are climate, diversity, and inclusion, social, economic and environment, Babble's 'Actual' sustainability score has risen from 188/500 in January 2022, to 261/500 currently (June 2022). This reflects the incremental and positive steps we have taken over the past five months

Babble's highest score by some way remains in the economic area (score 82/100). This measures economic impact by looking at corporate ethics and purpose, and whether responsible and good governance exists within an organisation. Babble's strengths in this area lie in operating its business in a fair and transparent manner, acting responsibly to mitigate risk, disclosing relevant information, safeguarding data, and

At Babble, we understand that as your organisation grows, your positive environmental and social impact should grow with you. Therefore, we have linked our strategy and business objectives to our vision of a more sustainable world and striving for a culture of sustainable development.

Babble is working with The Sustainability Group using the FuturePlus framework to assess our impact and contributions in a variety of environmental, social and governance fields. The FuturePlus framework separates the concept of sustainability into five areas which we measure ourselves against.

practising responsible innovation. Babble's 'Ambition' score has also risen, from 271/500 in January 2022, to 327/500 today. It is a testament to Babble's willingness to revisit the ambitions set during the initial assessment and push for stronger positive impact objectives.

We recognise it is our responsibility to ensure our products and services consider the betterment of society and the planet alongside profitability and financial returns, and our board and leadership team put this principle at the heart of our organisation's strategy and decision making. We will make every effort to bring about the incremental changes and improvements necessary to achieve our sustainability ambition.



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**GAVIN JONES, CHANNEL DIRECTOR
BT WHOLESALE**

BT in drive to electrify 29,000 vehicles

The sustainability challenge is a worldwide issue, but that doesn't mean organisations in the channel can't all take steps to create a fairer, more resilient, and low-carbon society.

Investing in energy-efficient solutions is a good place to start. For example, at BT Group we recognise that our largest source of carbon emissions today is associated with our fleet, which is a common contributor across businesses, including in the channel. To remove these emissions, we will need to replace 29,000 vehicles with electric alternatives, which is no mean feat.

Currently, there are not enough charging points to meet demand, and vehicle range and charging times are problematic for larger and heavier vehicles.

We're putting our money where our mouth is and investing in our fleet, as it's a clear and tangible way to reduce carbon emissions. What's more, the channel must champion new coalitions, including the UK Electric Fleets Coalition that's driving the transition to electric vehicles.

Organisations should also partner for change with like-minded suppliers, customers, peers, and government agencies to inspire wider climate action and solutions. At BT

Group, we're on track to be a net zero carbon emissions business by the end of March 2031, and for suppliers and customers by the end of March 2041, which has recently been brought forward by 15 years.

Tech is central to enabling a lower-carbon economy, which is why we're investing in our Green Tech Innovation Platform to help public sector and business customers transition to net zero. We've also set an ambitious commitment to reduce waste streams and ensure a circular tech and telco ecosystem by the end of March 2040. It's time to accelerate and lead the way to a bright, sustainable future.



STEPHEN DRACUP, CEO, CHSS ICT

Chess sustainability begins at home

place over Teams. This has reduced our office footprint from 6 to 1.

We also reviewed how we engage with our key stakeholders and relaunched our internal Green Team across the business so that we are now focussed on:

- Our people - we launched a Wiki within Teams containing advice on how to minimise your environmental impact. Over 50 people made a pledge to change one thing to help the environment. We run regular events to keep enthusiasm up
- Our suppliers - 95% of our environmental impact comes from suppliers. We have reviewed our supplier onboarding

When Covid struck we went from having most of our people based in an office to 100% home working. As making it easy to work securely anywhere, anytime is what we do, we managed this in under three weeks.

Once we were allowed back to the office, we reviewed our strategy and decided to remain 'home first'. Now, over 90% of our people are based at home and only come together if they need to at head office or in a network of small hubs. This cuts carbon emissions significantly as over 350 people no longer need to commute every day and over 90% of internal, supplier and customer meetings take

process to score their environmental impact and are in discussion with key suppliers so we understand what they are doing to limit carbon emissions and how we can work with them to make this happen

- Our customers - our sales efforts focus on transitioning customers to cloud services and low energy products such as FTTP. These are more efficient and will reduce emissions over time.

Our next steps will be to review our ESG strategy and decide if we need to adopt a standard and engage more with customers to see if we can work better together to reduce carbon emissions.



JAMES THORNTON, ENVIRONMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY MANAGER, CITYFIBRE

CityFibre ahead of the game with PIA

We're reducing the digital divide and levelling up the UK by building a new full fibre infrastructure that isn't just technically superior to copper wiring, it's also a much more sustainable solution for the planet.

We are committed to achieving net zero emissions by 2030 across our operations and our supply chain. We're excited to be well underway with key operational projects such as shifting to renewable energy, building the use of electric vehicles into our business, and working with our supply chain to address their emissions.

Our acceleration in

these areas is coupled with the foundations of our business. Our 'hybrid architecture' infrastructure is better by design and, amongst other factors, has minimal environmental impact. Our build out has been enabling low carbon connections for several years by repurposing yesterday's network through Physical Infrastructure Access wherever possible.

We have achieved this by recognising the principles of the carbon hierarchy and always preferring to build less and build clever to deliver the same infrastructure outcomes. By adopting PIA for more than 50% of our total connections, we were able to save 1300 tonnes of carbon emissions by the time we connected our millionth

home back in 2021. Looking to the future, we recognise the challenges ahead of our net-zero journey including the biggest challenge - transforming the supply chain to net-zero. Whilst we don't have all the answers what's clear is we'll need to use our 'challenger' mindsets and innovative thinking to help solve these problems. We will need to tap into our successful collaborative environments established with our build partners and work towards our procurement policies favouring low carbon solutions as a matter-of-course. At CityFibre, our 2030 target is more than a trajectory to net zero emissions - it's our daily reminder to act now and in the best interests of the planet.



FRASER FERGUSON, MANAGING DIRECTOR, KUBENET

Kubenet seeks carbon neutrality by 2045

to reduce the impact of travelling to the office, we have implemented a hybrid working approach. This not only saves time from their commutes, but ultimately lowers vehicle emissions.

We have obtained numerous accreditations over the years and now we are focusing on the environment. We're working towards ISO14001 accreditation, incorporating sustainable practices and reporting carbon emissions across all areas of the business. Not only are we committed to achieving net zero, but our partners are too. Microsoft is aiming to be carbon negative by 2030 and by 2050 Microsoft will remove from the

At KubeNet we are committed to a greener future, and we are consciously working on achieving KubeNetZero by 2045 in line with the Scottish Government's own net zero target.

To date, we have taken numerous steps to reduce our carbon footprint. We have purchased an electric van for site visits and installed our own electric charging point at our office. Our offices also make use of energy saving lighting, using 100% renewable energy.

Our team are also actively contributing to reducing our carbon footprint. We are aiming to go completely paperless, and

environment all the carbon the company has emitted. Another key partner, Cisco, is committed to reach net zero by 2040.

Finally, we encourage our own clients to be carbon neutral and our team are working to guide and encourage our own customers to achieve carbon neutrality, and, as a business technology partner, we are aware of the power of connectivity in enabling others to achieve their own decarbonisation targets. These steps are the start in KubeNet's ongoing work towards carbon neutrality - we are committed to incorporating sustainable practices as a strategic priority.





JOANNE BALLARD, ESG STRATEGY AND COMPLIANCE DIRECTOR, MAINTEL

It's all systems go for EnviroMaintel

We're all about helping customers and suppliers to meet their environmental targets which assists us in moving towards our 2034 net zero commitment. We've aligned our journey to the Sustainable Development Goals through our partner Worldwide Generation and we've committed to the Science Based Target Initiative.

We installed sensor lighting, reduced single use plastics, removed gas supply from our estate and worked with providers to ensure as many items as possible are recyclable. This year, removing fleet vehicles and introducing an ultra-low emissions vehicle salary sacrifice

scheme and agile working, with recommended use of public transport, has had a positive impact both environmentally and for the wellbeing of our employees. Also, we were the first all tech company to sign a Sustainability Linked Loan with HSBC Bank UK which includes key environmental and social targets and benefits. EnviroMaintel, our employee group, works with our employees to share ideas, not just for the office but for home as well.

The recently launched iCarbon Estimator enables a savings estimate of both electricity spend and CO2 savings to be created when preparing to move from on-premises to cloud-based services. Our corporate services have or are moving to cloud, and we're working closely with landlords to encourage green electricity supply.

For every 500 cloud seats customers connect with Maintel and on each employee birthday we plant 25 trees through our partner Ecologi, helping the environment and providing jobs for people working in the Maintel forest. Working with our customers and suppliers is key to our next phase, from a deeper understanding of what plans they have, to completing initiatives to reduce environmental impact throughout our value chain.

The achievement of Cisco Environmental Sustainability Specialisation and our partnership to recycle and reuse equipment, including the provision of refurbished mobile handsets continues to assist us in moving towards our goals.



SOHINI RAITHATHA, CEO, REDSQUID

Redsquid makes net zero a team effort

and we have since seen how appreciative our team are and how it now contributes to our recruitment.

You can't do any real changes without knowing what you have to work with, so first we found a trusted partner with aligned values, and together we worked to find out exactly how high our emissions were between scope 1, 2 and 3. After offsetting our emissions for the first year, we created a strategy of how and when we want to reduce our emissions, which now have become a part of our company mission and vision. We have just been through our first 'renewal' of our carbon neutral status and were again proud

Climate change is one of the biggest threats to our planet, and since businesses account for more than 85% of total GHG emissions in the UK – corporate action should be number one priority. When we started our journey towards becoming a carbon neutral organisation, we found that most organisations focused on this were consumer based and very few were service providers. As one of the few ICT service providers in the UK, we were extremely proud to become a carbon neutral organisation in 2021.

Our team was very involved in us making this decision at Redsquid,

to see we reached our target of a 5% reduction per employee per year.

In our first year, we have focused on making improvements within our offices where we have reduced single use items, eliminated single use plastic where possible, gone paper free in all but one department, and implemented a new recycling programme.

Together with our clients, we now help recycle their end-of-life items and, where possible, we donate them to others in need to increase lifespan, something we increased during the pandemic where we donated ours to young adults who needed the equipment to study from home.



WILL ENNETT, HEAD OF SUSTAINABILITY, TALKTALK WHOLESALE SERVICES

TalkTalk proves fibre greener than copper

Over the pandemic our data traffic soared by over 40%, yet in our latest numbers the emissions from our data centres and operations carrying that traffic reduced by 58%. This is not a one-off covid anomaly; over the last 5 years the reduction has been over 81%. How have we grown demand and reduced impact at the same time?

Firstly, we prioritised energy efficiency, installing air to cool data rooms allowing fresh air in place of refrigerants and fans to cool the data centre equipment. Secondly, we switched to run all our data centres on renewable

energy. Plans for future include electrifying our fleet and swapping out diesel generators.

However, if we want to offer low carbon connectivity solutions, data centre alone won't suffice. We need to tackle the network to carry the data, and the devices to utilise the network. A report we commissioned demonstrated that the move to full fibre is up to 80% more energy efficient than traditional copper lines.

Our internal research shows it's 18 times more carbon intensive to manufacture a new router than to refurbish

an existing one. So, we focused on this in every part of the lifecycle, from designing CPE, all the way through to ensuring the best possible experience for customers to easily return their equipment. The result has been the doubling of our rate of refurbishment. It's clear that the insatiable desire for data and connectivity is here to stay; and our aim is to unleash this positive societal benefit in a low carbon way. At TalkTalk Wholesale Services, we want to be the most sustainable provider for our partners as well as our end-users, and we invite our fellow channel leaders to join us on this journey!



AIDAN PIPER, CEO, WELCOMM

Focus group gets Welcomm staff involved

that refurbishes our old equipment, along with our customers, reducing electronics sent to landfill

- Encouraging our customers to use us to help them with recycling Electronic waste
- Banning all single use plastics in the workplace
- Partnering with local supplier 'Refill Revolution' for plastic-free office consumables
- Monitoring our progress via the 'Zellar' platform, making us accountable externally
- Promoting employee engagement in environmental initiatives. Recent events such as 'The Big Plastic Count', 'World Refill Day' and our monthly litter picking days have all proved popular.

Following the United Nation's publication of its 17 Sustainable Development Goals and the COP climate summits that followed, I knew that we had a responsibility as a leading supplier of communications to do our part and actively work towards net zero emissions.

To achieve this, our internal Sustainability Focus Group undertook a company-wide audit, identifying simple changes that we could action immediately. These included:

- Emailing invoices, saving on paper, ink, envelopes, and postage
- Following the guidance of the (WEEE Directive). Using an IT recycling company

We believe that, by giving staff a platform to voice their concerns, together we can achieve our goals. For example, one recent suggestion by a member of staff helped us invest in a biodiversity project that helped plant 500 new trees.

When it comes to current and future business operations, we have the 'green triangle' in mind; Reduce, Reuse and Recycle. There is still a misconception that recycling is the solution, but our eco partners have helped us realise that we must do more.

That's why our next big focus is to review our supply chain, to ensure that our partners are also doing everything they can to reduce waste and lower their environmental impact.



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Morey takes the lead

EnableX Chief Executive Will Morey shares insights into how his leadership brand and people-centric approach are driving the company's growth and shaping its long-term strategy.

Morey provides a glimpse into what is possible when we reimagine strategies and approaches through a teamwork lens, and he shows how collaborative leadership is likely to deliver more positive outcomes for all in the supply chain. In this mix, he says agility and flexibility are more important than ever, and that it is key for business leaders to recognise the human being at every step, whether in the context of the user experience, the support and interaction with customers and prospects, the engagement and motivation of teams, and most importantly for Morey, developing partnerships and collaborating with customers, suppliers and teams to ensure a win-win outcome.

"These priorities make leadership a more important skill than ever as the human aspects of what we do come to the fore," he said. "Everything we do across our business is driven by a focus on the human being at the end of the process."

Any leader who hasn't changed and adapted will face problems, believes

Morey, who leads by example... Pragma has not only embraced the many factors and challenges reshaping the business environment it also effected significant organisational restructuring including an acquisition. At the start of this year the company established EnableX, a group company that comprises Pragma, Candio and newly acquired Techland. "As part of this change we recruited new people and worked hard to build a solid leadership and management team as well as adding a number of apprentices into key functions," said Morey. "This investment in people is helping us to unlock the growth potential of EnableX and continue to deliver innovative propositions to our partners."

Morey has witnessed growth across all three businesses: Pragma grew as end users adopted UCaaS at faster rates than ever before, and Morey could see from market analysis reports that the business was growing quicker than the market. "We saw the same trends in Techland as enterprises adopted Ribbon SBC technology to embrace Teams, Zoom and to integrate existing



Will Morey

Everything we do across our business is driven by a focus on the human being at the end of the process

voice technologies," he added. "Most significantly we saw huge growth in Candio, our digital services business. We added over 40,000 organisations in its first 12 months of operation as people sought simple solutions to support how they could accelerate digital transformation and perform better online."

Focus areas

Morey's personal role in impacting the growth of EnableX falls into three areas. "Firstly, engaging with reseller partners and understanding their needs and how we can work together to improve our

proposition and innovate new value," he said. "Secondly, through working with vendor partners like Ericsson-LG and Ribbon to ensure we deliver what the market needs and what our partners want. Lastly, supporting our team. Right now, the priorities are heavily focused on making sure we are building propositions that are compelling, innovative and difficult for our competitors to replicate. We are also focused on making sure we hire great people and develop and retain the team we have."

Channel business leaders have done an 'outstanding

job' in bringing about change and creating new market opportunities, believes Morey, who says the channel is populated by entrepreneurs who embody innovation, deliver value and develop opportunities even during the most uncertain and disruptive times. "The last few years have been chaotic but I believe we are all more comfortable with uncertainty," he added. "ICT spending can thrive in chaotic times, especially as organisations seek to reduce costs, deliver flexibility or secure competitive advantage.

"Yet the macro economy and cost of living crisis weighs heavily on peoples' minds. In the short-term we want to help partners and our team to manage this and deliver what they need to continue to win and succeed. Longer-term challenges will be on shaping our technology proposition and we are fortunate to be working with Ericsson-LG and Ribbon among others who are developing an outstanding roadmap to support organisations in the future. The UK technology channel remains the most vibrant, innovative and high growth opportunity, and the challenges will be about helping our partners to keep pace with the changing landscape and technologies."

According to Morey, EnableX is built on the simple philosophy that 'partnership is everything'. "That's partnership with resellers, vendor partners and our team," he stated. "My ultimate leadership priority is to model this ethos and ensure that everyone across the business understands that it is the route to success." ■



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Managing risk factors

Six Degrees CISO Paul Rose assesses risk and risk tolerance following the pandemic and how to build a resilient organisation in a world of evolving security threats.

Operational resilience is now a top priority for business leaders and since the pandemic Six Degrees' tolerance level has had to change 'drastically'. "As with many other companies we moved quickly to remote working and had to rely heavily on cloud solutions," stated Rose. "This raised the risks that came with redefining where our perimeter started and ended, who had access to the data we retained and controlling the supply chain around that. Our biggest risks have been the expansion of our borders and data handling."

Risk tolerance during the pandemic highlighted several areas that companies had not considered. For example, many company perimeters were extended to home users' infrastructures, exposing them to shared Wi-Fi networks, shared laptops or PCs and unfiltered Internet access. If remote access into corporate systems wasn't set up correctly the possibility of malware traversing these networks and infecting centralised systems increased. The pandemic also brought data handling issues to the

fore, where users access sensitive data from locations where it would not have been opened before.

Rose commented: "I find myself being asked the same questions from many customers – how do we reduce our level of risk in this new world? And how can companies best leverage new technologies and new ways of working? I want our customer base to sleep easy at night knowing that we are using innovative methods alongside changes in policy and procedure to combat threats."

Strategic context

The pandemic has prompted Rose to consider risk in more of a strategic context that includes the organisation's wider aims and objectives. "With the change in the way companies now operate strategically you have to think about the change in people and policies on new rules for staff," he explained. "You need to consider technology and the tools needed to control the new boundaries of your estate, and new processes that ensure adherence to these controls and how you react in the event of an incident."



Paul Rose

Our biggest risks have been the expansion of our borders and data handling

Six Degrees has addressed the expansion of its borders and data handling risks by changing its policies to reflect more in-depth controls. "This includes a heightened level of audit, not accepting self-certification and requiring much more evidence as proof of cyber security controls," said Rose. "We have implemented new technologies (such as Microsoft Defender for Cloud and Defender for Endpoint) that provide us with a much more detailed, holistic view

of end users' activities. We have also implemented playbooks and procedures to ensure that our incident management is up to date and tested regularly.

"Where possible these areas have been addressed by ensuring that people experience little change in the way they do things and solutions are implemented sensibly and seamlessly. For instance, multi-factor authentication is used throughout the business.

This has been in place for several years and using it significantly reduces the risk of unauthorised access. Tools such as Defender for Endpoint are deployed automatically and as far as the end user is concerned they can go about their daily operations with minimal, if any, disruption."

Rose now has telemetry on each user's laptop or phone and he can make informed decisions about actions that may need to be taken. "We have automated playbooks that have reduced time to remediate issues and minimised (where appropriate) the human element of incident management," he added. "This means that in the event of an incident decisions are made much quicker.

"The areas that we need to focus on now is the move to a zero-trust strategy, which we are beginning to do. We have implemented some areas of this with respect to policies in our cloud solutions but not across the board. This is the future and it will eradicate many of the issues that networks face."

Rose enjoys 100 per cent support from the entire Six degrees C-suite. They understand that its strategy of 'secure by design' is first and foremost. "I can count on their support, their sign-off and ultimately if required the finances to support our strategy," added Rose. "If I can give one piece of advice to any C-suite individual it would be to understand the risks fully. Having a workforce that is fully aware of their responsibilities, adheres to policy and knows that the business takes cyber security seriously is key." ■



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On the road to full fibre

Here, NextGenAccess Sales Director Steve Mackervoy shares opinions and perspectives on the full fibre landscape, assessing market cross currents, the challenges facing altnets and why the channel is critical to driving adoption rates.

Full fibre roll outs continue at pace but are altnets being challenged to rethink how day-to-day adoption rates can be increased? According to Mackervoy, full fibre has a low degree of observability and given that marketing effectiveness is dependent on customer insight it could be argued that a significant shift in how customers are being served could be required, especially when you consider the marketing clout of larger incumbents.

Many altnets are building FTTP networks but existing FTTC speeds of 72Mbps are currently adequate for many consumers and businesses, believes Mackervoy. "There is a lack of awareness of altnet brands which don't have big marketing budgets," he stated. "Whereas consumers and businesses are bombarded via all channels with ads and offers made by incumbent big brands that currently deliver their services via lower speed technologies. Furthermore, the FTTC incumbents have made customers sticky with their triple and quad play

offerings. Predictive churn modelling is also a factor. Big brand incumbents are now offering better deals to customers on the verge of switching."

Because they lack the marketing budgets of the national providers, altnets must differentiate by providing a more personal service and by becoming active members of the community by sponsoring events, and supporting local schools and charities etc, noted Mackervoy. "And unless they embrace and encourage the use of voucher schemes, altnets are unlikely to be funded to the extent that they would build out to the difficult to serve homes and businesses that would benefit most from their services," he added.

To build pre-RFS awareness and registration NGA presents its wholesale customers with data from a variety of sources to provide them with insight into what business premises and tenants its fibre infrastructure passes. In the regions where NGA works with local authorities to deploy



Steve Mackervoy

There is a lack of awareness of altnet brands which don't have big marketing budgets

full fibre infrastructure, it works with them on joint marketing activities to raise awareness and encourage uptake of services delivered wholly or partly over its fibre.

Confusion

But despite these efforts, whether full fibre is generally perceived by customers to be superior to the broadband connectivity it replaces remains in question. "In most cases the speeds customers currently get are sufficient for their needs, but they are interested in much higher speeds although in reality, most of the problems they currently encounter are WiFi related, which full fibre is unlikely to fix," commented Mackervoy. "Most customers are confused. The broadband

services delivered to their homes over copper pairs are often marketed as fibre. In the B2B space, customers are better informed because they rely on industry professionals to advise them."

Mackervoy says the channel is 'absolutely crucial' in terms of being the trusted adviser to the vast majority of SMEs. "They know how to find the companies deploying networks and they know how to package up the offerings to make them appealing to customers," he noted. "Without the channel, the rate of fibre adoption would be even slower than it is right now."

That said, Mackervoy believes that a full fibre adoption

uptick is gathering pace. "The number of video calls has increased and this method of communication is here to stay," he added. "The amount of bandwidth required never seems to go down!"

It goes without saying that predicting the future structure of the full fibre sector is safer than taking a punt on the rate of fibre adoption, and Mackervoy observes that given the sheer number of altnets it's likely some will be acquired by big players, who in turn will be acquired by even bigger players. "It's likely that this was the original intent of some of the financial institutions that invested in them," he added. "Some will combine organic growth with inorganic growth through acquisition and grow in scale to such an extent that they will pass the long-term survivability test."

Mackervoy also noted that survivability is often not about the fundamentals of the business but the attitude of investor organisations. "Investors may therefore drive the anticipated consolidation of the market including businesses that may otherwise have survived as separate entities," he commented.

"I see consolidation happening among the large players in the market and the smaller players will need to adopt a wholesale model to allow them to compete in areas where they don't have a footprint. I also see more of the reseller community taking matters into their own hands and developing network capabilities of their own to allow them to compete with the larger players." ■

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Striking the balance between

The face of customer service has changed significantly in recent years. The pandemic heightened expectations and changed how end users wanted to interact with brands. A seamless omnichannel experience is now the minimum expectation.

In post-pandemic world companies must assess the role automation plays in the customer journey and ensure it is being used to enhance end-user experience. We asked our expert contributors how they were striking the perfect balance between automation and human interaction, to ensure all interactions left customers delighted.



OLIVER HENNEM
CLOUD BUSINESS

“CX is all about people so human interaction is essential, made apparent by the early days of the pandemic. But the move to remote working shaped what customer service looks like today. Customers chose to self-serve rather than picking up the phone. This led us to rethink our phone system which now integrates with the portal and our CRM, giving customers new channels. Our team provides the same level of service while customers use their preferred channel. Automation doesn’t take away from human touchpoints – customers will almost always need human interaction. The goal is to route them to the right person. A blended approach is essential.”



TRACY HILL
RYDAL GROUP

“The pandemic meant we needed to communicate in different ways to suit customer needs. We had our staff split between home skeleton crew based at the office. We introduced a mobile application on our primary phone system, which is still used across the base, allowing easy adaptation. Some of our processes are now more automated but good communication with the customer is still integral to a great experience. In terms of communication, we find the best experience comes from having conversations and we are guided by our customer needs and how they want to be supported.”



ROAN PRATT
PRAGMA

“The pandemic taught us that we need to be able to react quickly to any change in circumstances. Automation allows the channel to scale more efficiently and provide customer service quicker if delivered in a way that is easy to use. Otherwise, it will only increase the demand for human interaction. The balance relies on knowing your customers and communication is key. We have invested in our systems to speed up the process of ordering and provisioning through further automation and are looking to launch chatbots. We have also invested in our operations team and expanded the sales team to keep the balance of automation and human interaction.”



DUNCAN WARD
ENREACH

“The pandemic made us look at customer’s changing preferences with the lines between tiers of support needing to be constantly re-drawn. We redesigned customer journeys with virtual calls, 24/7 customer support and available technical experts proving essential. AI is giving us the tools and insights to create an excellent customer experience by provided employees access to new analytics, enabling them to make smarter decisions. AI has not replaced human intervention but has allowed us to find new ways to support customers. Digital response solutions will make sure your employees don’t face burn out whilst guiding support requests to the appropriate departments.”



OLIVER BAREHAM
FOURNET

“COVID-19 left with many end users feeling frustrated and unheard. Post-pandemic it’s important to seek improvement and evaluate changes to ensure that customers feel positive in their engagements. By striking the right balance between digital response solutions and human interaction, businesses will be able to create an exceptional customer experience. Giving the customer choice of channel increases the likelihood of them self-serving, reducing demand on contact centres and costs. Choosing the appropriate technology plays a significant role: using conversational AI to contain the conversation within a website, handing off to an account portal and updating the customer via messaging platforms.”



SOHINI RAITHATHA
REDSQUID

“Going digital doesn’t mean a less personal experience. It allows us to have more frequent interactions with each other and our customers. Personal interaction is important as we drive customers through the Digital Transformation, but technology provides us with amazing resources to connect with our customers. Digital interactions have evolved and provide efficient ways to address quick requests. We have implemented a Contact Centre solution into to give our customers a personalised experience, while ensuring they can go through to the last agent they spoke to and have a possibility for call backs. A strong combination is the perfect medium for customer relationships.”



LEE DRISCOLL
NUVIAS UK&I

“The pandemic accelerated the use of remote collaboration tools and created long-term working practices. We don’t feel customer experience was negatively impacted and the investments made in automation have improved our responsiveness. Whilst our teams are now available to meet with customers face to face, the use of MS Teams and collaboration platforms means we continue to engage virtually with people who find this convenient. Automating mundane tasks frees up people’s time to devote to human touchpoint activities that enhance the customer experience. The ideal balance depends on the customer, and one must be sensitive to individual requirements and respond dynamically, offering customers choice in how they engage.”



TeamsLink

Microsoft Teams direct routing, done right

automation and human touch



JEMMA BYRNE
SALESFORCE

"The pandemic pushed customers online, but the convenience made them stay. Eighty-eight percent of customers now argue that the experience a company provides is just as important as its product or services. AI is evolving how companies interact with customers, using data to drive actions at scale, and enabling personalisation. We are still discovering the full potential of automation and humans will always be front and centre to delight customers and build meaningful relationships. Automation frees employees from repetitive work and instead amplifies efficiency, insight and skill sets. It's about understanding the businesses' unique customer needs and delivering a personalised omnichannel experience."



OLIVER CLUTTERBUCK
EVE NETWORKS

"During the pandemic portal usage surged. We know that automation is key to meeting expectations and our systems were designed from the ground up to enable intuitive self-service. We're driving to reduce human touchpoints and look to automate where possible. This reduces human error and boosts efficiency. We are also equipping our support agents with the tools and knowledge they need, so they can deliver brilliant customer service when it's needed. That balance allows us to provide a little bit of sanity into what would otherwise be a completely digital process. Knowing that behind the scenes sits a team of real people gives customers confidence."



VICKI MACKAY
ONECOM PARTNERS

"Pandemic pressures created community but also heightened customer expectations. Digital portals supporting billing, administration and access to information can enable positive and personalised customer experience. We drove investment into these avenues to improve usability to allow self-service under a 24/7/365 approach. Striking the balance between digital and human interaction is case dependant. Sensitive queries requiring empathy may be better handled by a human. The same goes for complex requests. Responses to FAQ's however, are better serviced digitally. Understanding patterns allows you to apply intelligence to drive that engagement. As a result, CX is becoming ever more personalised and seamless, building stronger brand loyalty."



BERNIE MCPHILLIPS
PANGEA

"The pandemic brought mutual admiration for what our industry was doing in finding new ways to communicate and deliver services. Even now, we ensure as much as possible is done remotely without missing out. When it comes to giving customers the best experience, you must adopt a hybrid support model. Automation is king for convenience, but sometimes customers need consultation and don't want to have to go through a maze to speak to someone. You must be accessible and give customers options. We invested six figures into new portal automations, while also doubling our operational support. Both are key to a great customer experience."



CRAIG HERRETT
PROVU
COMMUNICATIONS

"The pandemic has brought us closer to our customers and we are now speaking more regularly to ensure top support. This has proved powerful considering the ongoing chipset shortage, enabling us to share our knowledge and recommend alternatives. Online ordering, provisioning and device management have always been a big part of our business, but human touchpoints continue to play a large part in the customer journey. Some partners just want to order online and never pick up the phone, whereas others prefer to build a relationship with us. The key thing for us to create the optimal customer experience is to listen and adapt. There is no one-size fits all."



DAREN FINNEY
MITEL

"The pandemic has made quality customer experience the bare minimum expectation. Customers look for 24x7 customer service and support features that can be facilitated with the right agile communication tools. AI is making communication more efficient, allowing human touchpoints to focus on interactions that are more complex or impactful. Striking the right balance between human touch and digital interactions is tricky and we're seeing increasing numbers of customers asking for help with getting this balance right. They want to take advantage of chatbots, and agent assist apps but without losing the 'human touch'. An omnichannel CX strategy can often provide the right approach to optimising the customer experience."



HILARY OLIVER
TOLLRING

"When everyone set up at home, the focus was on maintaining CX. Initially, customers were willing to accept delays however soon lost sympathy if poor service became the norm. We have introduced online support through training webinars, tutorials and online help, to widen accessibility and promote engagement. External video meetings have helped us to build closer, less formal relationships, as we glimpse into someone's home life. Automation should save time on both sides, with human touchpoints at exactly the right time. The right balance is critical. The key is to understand your audience, the types of enquiry, the ideal journey and critically when humans should interact."



CHERIE HOWLETT
JOLA

"At Jola, we always start with the desired outcome and work back. Our partners want complete control over their own customer experience rather than picking up the phone to us. The pandemic changed the way we liaised with partners for good. Face-to-face meetings were done on Teams, partner training was easier and more effective and Jola partners closed deals quicker. We hope we have struck the right balance. Portals are available so partners can support customers directly, although they can rely on us to help identify and win new opportunities. Information is readily available for partners to find in our knowledge base however, we will answer the phone within 20 seconds."

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GoTo appoints CEO



Paddy Srinivasan

IN A BID to accelerate innovation and growth in the SMB space GoTo has promoted its Chief Product and Technology Officer Paddy Srinivasan to the CEO role, taking over from Mike Kohlsdorf who served as chief exec since January.

Srinivasan first joined GoTo, then known as LogMeln, in 2013 as General Manager. He left the business to become General Manager of Data, Machine Learning Platform Services at Amazon Alexa AI before returning to GoTo in 2020. Earlier in his career, Srinivasan was Founder and CEO of Opstera, a cloud monitoring and management start-up that was acquired by Avanade, the Microsoft-Accenture joint venture.

"Paddy and I have worked in close collaboration for several years and I believe he is positioned to see GoTo through this pivotal moment of accelerated growth and product innovation," said Kohlsdorf.

Also on the move...

ABZORB has appointed Amanda Hughes as Business Development Manager for Scotland. She brings 20 years telecoms industry experience and started out with John Caudwell on mobile accessories before heading up TalkTalk's offshore business for mobiles, cloud and UC in South Africa. Head of Indirect Mark Riddell said: "Amanda will be focused on managing and supporting our existing resellers in Scotland and helping them drive business and revenue, and recruiting more resellers. She will also be encouraging IT resellers to review and invest in their telecoms portfolio following the acceleration of remote working, UC and the convergence of comms and IT."



Amanda Hughes

TELCOSWITCH has added 40-plus years experience in the technology, software and financial services sectors with the hire of Ivan Martin as Non-Executive Chairman of the Board. He has served as Chairman of Aptitude Software Group since March 2016 and was Chairman of Xceptor until April 2021. Martin was CEO of Misys Banking and Capital Markets, a board member of Misys and Chairman of FDM Group from 2006 to 2019. "Ivan is highly regarded in the SaaS market and will be an invaluable counsel as we move forward," said CEO Russel Lux.

SD-WAN and SASE services business Aryaka has pulled in Steve Harrington as MD of its EMEA and APC markets. The appointment draws on Harrington's near 30 years industry experience and reflects Aryaka's strategy to build its channel business. Harrington's previous roles include channel positions at TalkTalk Business and Masergy.



Steve Harrington

"The market for enterprise connectivity and secured enterprise applications has changed radically during lockdown," stated Harrington. "Now, businesses require maximum flexibility to adapt to new working models, rising online traffic and never-before-seen cyber security channels. With network edges growing, there's a new need for end-to-end services that can be redesigned at will."

JIM Tholen has joined Akixi as Non-Executive Chairman, and Scott Hoffpaur joins as a Board Member. The appointments come five months after Akixi secured growth investment from Axiom Equity and True North Advisory. Tholen and Hoffpaur are managing partners at True North. Akixi CEO Craig Decker stated: "Jim and Scott bring drive, insight and expertise to help us execute our global growth strategy."

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