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3-8

Industry News

Catch up with the latest news

12

Business Profile

Geeks by name: Top techies by nature

14

Women leaders

Tempest's quest to diversify boards

18

Channel Forecast

Hard times but Net Zero remains key

40

D&I Matters

Fostering female talent at the top

50

Comms People

This month's movers and shakers



Tough times no block to growth

ECONOMIC headwinds are no barrier to scale and the prospects for channel businesses remain strong despite toughening times, according to industry experts at last month's Comms Vision Convention.

SPECIAL REPORT

As market headwinds pick up speed there is every reason for the channel's leaders to remain optimistic, enthused TalkTalk Group CEO Tristia Harrison (pictured) in her Comms Vision Convention keynote (2-4 November, Gleneagles Hotel).

"This could be seen as a tough time with a hard hand to play, but with adversity comes an enormous opportunity for us all to step up and show what this

extraordinarily resilient sector can do," she stated.

"While these are difficult times for the country I feel enormously optimistic about what people in this industry can deliver together.

"It's always been the case that in adversity we move forward. High bandwidth connectivity has never mattered more and we can keep the UK connected for the next generation."

Harrison is not alone in recognising the channel's

strengths. Daryl Pile, Managing Director for Channel at Gamma, cited in particular the UCaaS market which has 'massive' room to grow with eight million UCaaS seats taken in the UK, and Cavell forecasts a rise to 14 million.

"Our market is like no other in Europe because it belongs to the channel," he stated. "Despite caution there will be opportunities and you need to strike."

Comms Vision 2022 Special Report – pages 23-38.



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EDITOR'S COMMENT



Stuart Gilroy

IN THE past Comms Dealer has been 'accused' of being too 'male' in terms of content. One example I clearly remember, because I was there, was the pre-discussion chit-chat before a round table event (which happened to be on

diversity and inclusion) when it was said that for every Comms Dealer page you turn there is a photo of a middle aged white man, and no women.

I did want to point out that this was a slight exaggeration, but on the whole that's the way it was – men vastly outnumbering women. The fact is that we tried very hard to get as many women in the magazine as possible. Another fact is that, most times, it felt like a lost cause. So much so that when an opportunity arose we swooped wide eyed with open arms. The same observation has been made in reference to our Comms Vision conference which is still male dominated. Again, that's of course a reflection of the industry rather than a matter of preference. But things are changing.

Contrary to what many may think, Comms Dealer has been bashing the D&I drum for many years, championing women whenever possible. And for my part, what was once a major challenge to increase female representation in these pages, it is becoming far easier and marks an achievement not for us, but for the women who make this change possible.

I hope that one day those channel businesses that work with schools and further education to attract young talent into this industry, particularly female talent, are able to put forward Comms Dealer to prove the case that the channel is a career path for females as much as males, reflecting the success of female role models such as those featured this month on pages 10, 14-15, 22, 40-41, 42-43 and 46.

Stuart Gilroy, Editor

- Comms Vision Convention Special Report: Pages 23-38
- Inside track on BT Wholesale's Partner Plus Live event: Page 44

Rigby backs MSP launch



Steve Harris

NEW MSP CloudClevr has launched in the UK backed by a £50m investment from the Rigby Group.

CloudClevr intends to acquire several tech businesses as it seeks to become a next-gen cloud-first service provider.

CloudClevr Chief Executive Steve Harris commented: "I'm looking forward to embarking on another exciting growth opportunity with Rob Smith alongside me as CTO."

The pair founded Nuvias Unified Communications and stepped down in April last year.

They say CloudClevr will be differentiated through the deliv-

ery of a 'highly curated' set of converged managed services.

"This will be combined with a digital platform and simple monthly contract model that will enable businesses to maximise the return on their technology investments," added Harris.

Rigby Group Co-CEO Steve Rigby stated: "Our strategic investment will initially establish CloudClevr in the UK and then further into Europe.

"There is a clear opportunity in the European market for a managed service provider with deep technology skills and a software platform that delivers a genuine choice."

NEWS ROUNDUP

BABBLE has scaled up its mobile business and strengthened its relationship with O2 following the acquisition of Chester-based mobile services reseller Vivio. The deal also bolsters Babble's footprint in the north west and comes after the acquisitions of Active, Concert and Lake. Founded in 2001 Vivio has over 60,000 mobile connections on multiple platforms across the UK. The transaction is Babble's ninth acquisition this year (since 2019 it has completed 24 deals). Babble CEO Matt Parker commented: "Our experience across contact, cyber and comms means we can help Vivio's customers grow faster by introducing new technology to different areas of their businesses."

BOLTON-based Firstcom Europe's influence in the north west region will be more strongly felt following its acquisition of Warrington located Raspberry Beret, a company best known for providing mobile phones and unified communications products. The business was established 12 years ago and adds circa £1.4m (90% recurring) to Firstcom Europe's revenues. Firstcom's acquisition strategy is backed by a £30m funding package from Kartesia.



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NEWS ROUNDUP

US-BASED MSP Thrive has acquired Nottingham located Custard Technical Services, boosting the UK IT provider's managed cybersecurity, cloud and automation platform. Thrive CEO Rob Stephenson commented: "Adding Custard to our expanding UK operations will open up the Birmingham, Manchester and Leicester markets for Thrive's managed services and cybersecurity offerings."

NODE4'S Microsoft cloud capabilities received another boost following its second acquisition this year. This time the Derby-based MSP snared Tiski, a Microsoft business applications partner that delivers enterprise cloud solutions using Dynamics 365, Power Platform and Azure Technologies to the public sector. Node4 said it will retain all 184 Tiski staff taking the group's headcount to more than 1,100 people with over 2,000 customers. Tiski is Node4's third acquisition under principal investor Providence Equity Partners, and follows the purchase of TNP (The Nav People – the Microsoft NAV and Business Central partner; and Risual, an Azure-focused MSP.

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

IT support acquisition for Flotek

MSP Flotek Group has bagged its second acquisition just two months after its first deal, this time snapping up IT support service provider MazingTree as part of a plan to triple in size over the next six months.

The transaction expands Flotek's influence into the south west across Plymouth, Devon and Cornwall, as well as the wider Wales area.

Flotek CEO Jay Ball said: "We know how important having a dedicated IT provider with a local presence is to SMEs, and the services MazingTree offers are a natural fit with Flotek."

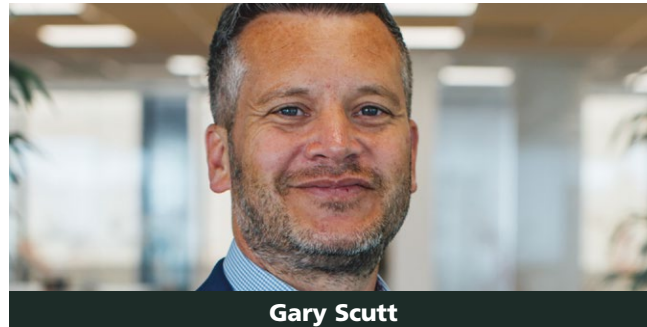
"This is the perfect base for us and unlocks potential for growth. It's an area where we have seen our competitors consolidate and customers seeking a new strategic local partner."

MazingTree's technical team will integrate within the larger group and John Allan, MazingTree Technical Director, will remain in the group.



Jay Ball

4Com lands Eastern buy



Gary Scutt

BOURNEMOUTH-based 4Com's swoop on comms firm Eastern Telephones (best known as Eastern Voice and Data) provides a strong presence in Norwich and Norfolk and is its second transaction in six months, having acquired midlands-based Midshire Telecom in May.

Established in 1992, Eastern Voice and Data has 30 years experience delivering telecoms services to private and public sector organisations mainly in the Norwich area.

4Com CEO Gary Scutt stated: "As with our acquisition of Midshire Telecom there is a tremendous opportunity here. We want to continue supplementing our growth by acquiring other suitable companies."

Dean Cartledge, 4Com's Chief Operating Officer, added: "We understand that deciding to

sell a business can be an emotional process.

"We believe in being up-front and honest in our communication with potential acquisitions, and that's been crucial in completing this deal."

NEWS ROUNDUP

AN ENHANCED core platform (based on dedicated switched Ethernet technology) for National High Capacity Services (NHCS) is being rolled out across the UK by Virgin Media Business Wholesale. The launch is the latest development in Project Spark, a multi-million-pound investment programme designed to transform the wholesaler's 10Gbps portfolio. The project also marks the first stage of a larger partnership with Ciena. The roll out will continue through 2023 and 2024. Virgin Media Business Wholesale Fixed Director Diego Tedesco commented: "The launch is set to provide our partners with quicker and simpler provisioning."

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Channel Forecast Insight Session: Maximising the journey to all-IP

Preparing for the 2025 PSTN shutdown and overcoming the challenges of stop-sell is a channel priority that's growing in importance by the day. But to capitalise on the opportunities in front of us channel businesses need to deploy the right strategies and tools available to them to the full.

And with greater uncertainty around the economy and no clear pathway to the switch-off itself, this insight session will explore the readiness and vulnerability of organisations at this time, both channel and end user, and ask whether enough is being done to maximise the UK's journey to all-IP.

Join the debate!

To participate in this editorial round table contact **Heather Miles** on **01895 454405** or hmiles@bpl-business.com for full details.

comms dealer | Forecast Sessions

CityFibre in toob link-up

CITYFIBRE'S wholesale customers have access to toob's network footprints following what has been described as an 'industry first' link-up.

The deal sees south of England located toob extend its broadband retail proposition across CityFibre's network.

The companies have also agreed Heads of Terms for a wholesale aggregation partnership that will see toob's current and future network builds incorporated into CityFibre's Ready for Service footprint, expanding the addressable market for CityFibre's ISP partners.

The technical integration of toob's footprint is expected to be completed by summer 2023.

CityFibre CEO Greg Mesch said: "This deal represents the UK's first major partnership between infrastructure builders, establishing a new model of wholesale aggregation that accelerates and expands the addressable footprint available to our wholesale ISP partners.

"For smaller fibre network builders which currently only



Greg Mesch

offer their own retail broadband services across their footprint, it also establishes an opportunity to expand their retail offering, opening a wholesale revenue stream and maximising take-up over their network."

toob CEO and founder Nick Parbutt added: "Opening our own network to other ISPs has been part of our strategy from the outset, and partnering with CityFibre allows ISPs to access the toob full fibre network."

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NEWS ROUNDUP

COMMSWORLD has reported a 60% rise in gross profit on a revenue increase of 20% from £20.6m in 2020 to £24.1m.

Boosted by a £20m-plus framework agreement for digital connectivity services with North Lanarkshire Council the Edinburgh-based comms provider posted a gross profit rise to £7.5m (up from £4.7m in the previous year). CEO Steve Langmead stated: "This contract along with similar opportunities can enable significant growth in the years ahead for the group."

NORTHERN Telecom's Ops Director Simon Rodgers has blamed poor leadership for the demise of Toople, which Northern acquired last month. "A fundamentally flawed business model and questionable strategic decisions have masked what we believe to be a business with strong underlying financials," said Rodgers. The deal is Northern's eighth in five years and sees the bulk of Toople's business and assets return to private ownership. Toople was listed on the LSE in May 2016 and acquired DSML in 2020.

Telecom Acquisitions extends fibre reach with TalkTalk deal

TALKTALK'S consumer wholesale strategy received a boost following a partnership with Telecom Acquisitions, which manages residential broadband products from its largest mass market Home Telecom brand and the more specialist rural base with Fleur Telecom.

Telecom Acquisitions recently added Hive to its portfolio and has big ambitions for Eclipse Broadband.

TalkTalk Consumer Wholesale Services MD Nick Gunga has joined the Telecom Acquisitions board to help support the partnership.



Nigel Barnett

Telecom Acquisitions CEO Nigel Barnett said: "With the focus on FTTP, to be aligned with a company that has a pres-

ence in over 3,000 exchanges and agreements with altnets means we can offer clients services from major providers."

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Four-day week now official at Highgate

WORKERS at Highgate IT Solutions have an official and permanent four-day week following a trial that started in April this year.

When the scheme launched Sales Director Bob Sahota stated: "The last two years have provided us with new perspectives on life and emphasised the importance of two key areas – employee wellbeing and the value of time."

Highgate will pay employees 100 per cent pay for 80 per cent of the time in return for 100 per cent productivity, and the company saw a record month in sales during May.

"Highgate is more than a business or brand, it is our vision of what a harmonious work-life balance should look like, one without stress, pressure or anxiety," said Sahota. "By moving to a 4-day week we are giving back the most valuable thing in life – time."

To support the trial with quantifiable results Highgate worked with clinical psychologists from Ultimate Resilience who evaluated the impact of the four-day week on employee wellbeing and experience.

They confirmed a strong consensus among employees



Stuart Marginson

that their work-life balance had improved with less emotional burn out and more time to spend on hobbies, recreation or relaxation and time with family.

Dr Joanna Burrell from Ultimate Resilience observed: "Our bespoke staff survey used a robust methodology – consequently the findings provide reliable information about the various ways in which the four-day week trial impacted staff wellbeing and experience."

"This data will inform decisions about adaptations and future direction and will also serve as a benchmark to measure the impact of the four-day week going forwards."

Highgate said there have been no detrimental effects to business since the introduction of the 4-day week model.

"We needed to find a balance between the wellbeing of our employees and the success of the business," said MD Stuart Marginson. "We wanted to support our employees and ensure the right level of resource was available across the business at any given time."

"By not doing so, we risked overloading our employees which could prove to have an adverse effect on their wellbeing and undo the positives that the four-day week brings."

"Over the course of the trial we up-skilled operational team members to cover other areas, which also increased business continuity and general resilience. We made many tweaks to the 4-day week structure to find a solution that works for us and now we are making this a permanent change."

Sahota added: "We hope that our journey can inspire other companies to fearlessly explore moving to a 4-day week, as the positive impact it can have on employee wellbeing, mental health and overall work-life balance is too great to be ignored."

Halpin set for hike in revenues

IN A YEAR-end trading update CloudCoCo reported what it described as a 'step change' in sales with revenue forecasted to be circa £24m, up £16m on last year following acquisitions. EBITDA is expected to be around £1m, up from £745k.

CEO Mark Halpin said: "The period under review is characterised by a focus on integrating and optimising the four acquisitions made in late 2021, while taking steps to ensure the group moves forward as a single cohesive unit."

"We are confident 2023 will be another year of strategic and commercial progress. Our organic growth prospects are strong and all parts of the business are fully embedded and operating profitably, with a programme of investment underway to bolster our sales efforts."

"We are also exploring complementary acquisitions with the potential to enhance our one-stop-shop capabilities."



Mark Halpin

NEWS ROUNDUP

RYDAL Group has acquired NDG Technology's business communication client base. MD Steffan Dancy said: "The acquisition was a no brainer as the majority of clients are located between our Peterborough and Lichfield offices. Our wider support functions will provide additional support to the 100-plus customers." The deal is Rydal's second transaction this year, building on the purchase of MSP BrokenStones IT in March. "We will be continuing our growth both organically and through acquisitions," added Dancy.

BT WHOLESALE'S Partner Plus resellers will gain access to EE mobile connectivity for the first time in early 2023 when the service launches following trials. The move enables resellers to sell 4G and 5G solutions, with EE looking to cover 90% of the UK landmass with 5G by 2028. The launch is timely, according to BT Wholesale which cited the PSTN switch-off in 2025 as a catalyst. Gavin Jones, Channel Partner Director, commented: "We are seeing a clear shift in businesses moving away from legacy voice services, and the EE mobile SIM is another way to deliver access however partners need it."

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Using AI to power a new era of customer service quality

Elsa Chen, Chief Customer Officer, CityFibre

CityFibre is making generational improvements to how ISPs manage the full fibre upgrade for their customers.

Customer experience, let's face it, has never been one of our industry's strong suits. A broadband upgrade can often seem more trouble than it's worth, and trying to fix things – a service outage, say – is often far from straightforward.

It doesn't have to be this way. By using clever artificial intelligence algorithms, service delivery – from an end-user's perspective – can be effortless and intuitive. Problems can also be solved quickly, perhaps before the customer is even aware of them.

In the past, infrastructure builders have often used their wholesale status to avoid responsibility for the full customer journey, leaving that down to ISPs to tackle alone. We see things very differently at CityFibre. While we are wholesaling full fibre connectivity, that doesn't mean we don't care about how end customers are faring when they upgrade their legacy copper connections. We care very much. In fact, we see full fibre adoption as a fully-shared responsibility with ISPs.

ISPs as partners, not just customers

We believe in working closely with our ISP partners, developing bespoke services that will enable them to differentiate in the market on



“The vision is to make moving to full fibre as simple as a software upgrade pushed to your phone.”

Elsa Chen

customer experience. We use a 'service co-creation' model to define the ideal customer journey with each ISP and then set about delivering it together, leveraging our technology and capabilities. The aim is to help our ISPs move large numbers of customers from legacy copper to our full fibre infrastructure in a way that's effortless for the consumer. The vision is to make moving to full fibre as simple as a software upgrade pushed to your phone.

Getting off the white-knuckle ride

Everyone knows that retaining customers is just as important as attracting new ones, and managing customers through any upgrade or migration journey can be a white-knuckle ride for ISPs, not to mention resource-intensive. If things

don't run smoothly, then customers might ditch the process and stick with their existing package – or worse still, be motivated to shop around and move to a competitor. The typical way of managing a migration programme is for ISPs to create a database of target customers and then contact them through call centres. A letter drop is also needed, making sure those contacted understand the migration process and are happy with it. Once that's done, call centre capacity is used to book an engineer appointment, as well as handle any requests to change that appointment.

In contrast, our AI-powered approach to managing customer migration is a breath of fresh air. We began implementing the

AI-powered engagement tool concept late last year with a large ISP partner that sought to move tens of thousands of prospective customers from copper to our full fibre infrastructure. Our approach puts much less strain on the customer and ISP and is also far more cost-effective. Once the database is set up, our ISPs need only contact their prospective customer once – via email or letter – informing them that a full fibre service is available. All future communication is done via SMS, generated by us on behalf of the ISP.

Subsequent text exchanges are human-like and conversational, not robotic – technology with a human heart as I like to call it – and can handle various enquiries and requests, including shifting booked engineer

appointments to another day. From an end customer perspective, as well as for our large ISP partner – which can happily avoid the expense and operational pain of call centres – the migration process is trouble-free. For our industry this is transformational.

One AI size doesn't fit all

Different ISPs have different customer experience requirements. Service co-creation, or co-design – in CityFibre's book – means developing bespoke AI solutions rather than expecting a standard solution to serve all. The creation process therefore involves our operational teams working with customer experience experts from different ISPs to ensure our AI-powered engagement tool is tailored to deliver friction-free service in every scenario.

This bespoke way of working with ISPs has already turned old industry norms on their head. Not only are more and more end customers getting on with what's truly important in their lives rather than waiting in queues, but they are enjoying the best possible start to their fibre-powered future and sharing those experiences. As a project, excitingly, it's also just one of many – each live proof of what's possible when you challenge the past and choose never to stand still.



There's something beyond the Horizon...

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QPE adds Yay.com platform

INVESTMENT firm Queen's Park Equity (QPE), which backed the MBO of TelcoSwitch in June this year, has partnered with Yay.com in a deal that gives TelcoSwitch's channel partners access to Yay.com's public cloud UCaaS platform.

TelcoSwitch founder and CEO Russell Lux commented: "Yay.com's proprietary solutions and its capability to deploy immediately and at scale make it a powerful proposition for specific segments of the channel market."

Yay.com founder and CEO Matt Mansell added: "We can provision one user or 100,000 users in seconds. Combined with WebRTC device and desktop apps and omnichannel capabilities we will close out 2022 with a powerful punch."



Russell Lux

NEWS ROUNDUP

INTERNAL promotions at Zen see David Barber become Director of Strategy and Amanda Rogers take the Head of Marketing role. CEO Paul Stobart said: "David and Amanda have already made significant contributions to the development of Zen and will play an integral role in ensuring that our business, product and marketing strategies deliver on our ambitions." More new appointments on page 50

SPITFIRE Network Services has lifted the lid on FireSwitch Hosted PBX 2.2, its latest SME cloud telephony solution. New features include mobile and desktop softphones as standard and the option of full system call recording using AWS storage. Sales Director Dom Norton said: "With businesses operating in so many ways flexibility and ease of use is hugely significant."

CHIPPENHAM-headquartered B2B IT solutions provider Bechtel has acquired Northampton-based ACS Systems UK, which was founded in 1995 and has 93 employees. Bechtel and ACS had previously worked on a number of projects together and the transaction delivers a joint managed services platform.

Kearney navigates dynamic ICT sector

FIVE months into the job Firstcom Europe UK MD Ewan Kearney has drawn on his 25 years experience in the travel industry to navigate the firm's fast growth buy-and-build journey.

"The telecoms industry is dynamic and change happens in a blink of an eye," he stated.

"Firstcom Europe is ambitiously pursuing a unified communications strategy and in the last two months undertook three



Ewan Kearney

acquisitions and relocated the team to a new office."

Group CEO Christian Bleakley added: "Ewan has injected fresh ideas and a new approach to the UK operation."

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Nurturing female leaders

As a woman on the Zen Board of Directors, it is the diversity of input, ideas and challenges she brings to the table that truly make an impact, says People & Culture Director Ayshea Robertson. Having a strong female presence in the boardroom can bring multiple benefits ranging from a better understanding of customer profiles and employee satisfaction through to positive company reputation and more innovative solutions. But the biggest barrier is not having enough women at a senior leadership level to enable progression to the board, observes Robertson. "This is why we have created women specific leadership development and mentorship programmes," she stated.

"All of the work I am doing on creating more gender balance in the sector and helping women into leadership roles forms



Ayshea Robertson

the foundations required to help women progress to board positions. It's important to start with the foundations so there is a talent pipeline coming up through an organisation that aspire to the top seats."

Robertson introduced and chairs Zen's Women In Tech (WIT) group which tackles barriers, delivers female specific development and assists with career progression. "Since its inception we have rewritten job

specifications and overhauled our recruitment process to eliminate gender bias," she said. "We've increased flexibility across all roles and most recently launched a female mentor scheme to support women in their growth and development."

Increasing numbers

The WIT Group has 50-plus volunteers with a goal to increase the percentage of women in leadership roles in the tech industry. "But we need to take things step by step and have other objectives we are working towards," explained Robertson. "We are determined to increase the percentage of women at Zen, the percentage of women in tech roles and the percentage of women in leadership positions. We are also working to identify and reduce any gender pay gaps."

Among the wider actions to be taken to boost the number of women

on boards, Robertson urges board directors and chairs to be trained on gender bias and proactively request a gender balanced shortlist when looking to appoint to the board. "They should also look at board processes and requirements to ensure there is no unintentional bias," she added. "Be proactive with leadership development and establish credibility with the board. It is also important to broaden perspectives beyond areas of expertise and get used to taking a companywide and more strategic view of things."

In Robertson's experience the comms sector has made progress on increasing diversity at leadership level, but the advances are slow. "Diversity is not driven as hard as it should be," she said. "It is still seen as doing the right thing as opposed to being a core strategic business objective." ■

The Women on Boards agenda continues on pages 14, 22, 40 and 42.

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Geeks by name and top te

Not only has Cloud Geeks Managing Director Mike Ianiri optimised the capabilities and opportunities that cloud transformation delivers, he also provides clarity on the factors underpinning end user buying decisions and how to establish a solid cloud migration strategy.

Ianiri has been immersed in IT and comms from a young age. His father started a business called Power Computing in 1986 operating as one of the largest distributors of Commodore Amiga in Europe. Ianiri senior urged his son to sit in meetings with suppliers, to listen and take note. This instilled a business acumen and ambition that led the budding entrepreneur to run his own businesses, including a successful IT and telecoms firm set up in 2010 which he sold in 2015.

Cloud Geeks (a division of Power Computing) was established in January 2020 by Ianiri and his brother Tom, just before the global Covid-19 outbreak. "We felt there was a market for SMEs and mid-market industries to enjoy the cloud technology experienced mainly by larger enterprises, especially around managed cloud IT," stated Ianiri. "Being on the Crown Commercial supplier list helped us drive growth by

winning big ticket tenders. But Covid and working from home gave us exponential growth. We are seeing a large shift in SME and mid-market wanting a solid cloud migration strategy."

Ianiri expects 35 per cent growth within the next 12 to 18 months, building on its 10 headcount and circa £2 million turnover today. "Our goal is to be between £8 million and £10 million in three to five years time with a strong EBITDA," stated Ianiri. "This will come from continued organic growth as well as acquisitions. We will be looking at one or two transactions within the next year with possibly more to follow. The buy and build approach is going to be key for us."

Cloud Geeks' primary client profile includes businesses above 100 users ranging between legal, manufacturing and public sector industries. "We are having many discussions with



Mike Ianiri

Businesses are adopting a cloud-first approach, and a growing number of companies can foresee a time when they will move the majority of their IT to the cloud

clients wanting to outsource their IT," he added. "There will be a rise in outsourcing internal IT help desks within the next two years as CTOs seek to save on costs. Therefore businesses are adopting a cloud-first

approach and a growing number of companies can foresee a time when they will move the majority of their IT to the cloud. We've also seen a huge increase in cloud desktop deployments as IT budgets have been tightened,

leaving less to spend on hardware and BYOD."

As well as providing managed cloud IT services Cloud Geeks delivers cyber security and cloud telephony solutions. Its primary technology partners

Geeks by nature

are Avaya, Microsoft and Sophos. And to maximise technology and market opportunities Ianiri has sharpened his focus on key target markets and customer profiles, rather than pursue a 'take all' strategy.

"We have been selective with who we work with," he added. "As a small business we can evolve and make decisions quickly, now targeting quality rather than quantity. We have also seen a shift in client habits towards a one supplier approach, rather than different suppliers for various technology areas. Being able to offer six or seven different

There will be a rise in outsourcing internal IT help desks within the next two years as CTOs seek to save on costs

ICT solutions to clients has helped drive growth."

Inviting existing and potential clients to workshops has also helped drive engagement around the cloud IT arena, noted Ianiri. Another important area of fertility is the sticking plaster many businesses applied during Covid in the rush to adopt remote and home working solutions. "They've realised this wasn't the best strategy for long-term technology goals," noted Ianiri.

This requirement is accompanied by growing demand for public cloud

services. Companies are also looking for cloud services to help automate work and business processes.

According to trade.gov the UK is the largest public cloud market in Europe, estimated to be worth around \$30 billion by 2030, currently hovering at circa \$22 billion. A big market trend driving this growth, observed Ianiri, is demand for managed IT support help desk which he reiterated is a key area, especially in the mid-market arena.

Winning formula

To give customers what they want his consultants take a three pronged approach – Assess, Plan and Deploy – which forms the foundation for successful projects from start to finish. It's a winning formula that saw Cloud Geeks scoop the Comms National Awards 2022 Managed Service Solution of the Year gong in October. "We always go into a project with a proof of concept phase before any customer commitment," added Ianiri.

"In providing a solid migration strategy along with technical expertise we offer a service which secures long-term recurring managed cloud services contracts," noted Ianiri. "Many companies have scaled down since the pandemic to smaller offices due to the high numbers of staff working from home, so IT managers no longer have large comms rooms to store on-premise equipment. This is where we have seen huge gains from a lift-and-shift of on-premise servers and applications to Microsoft Azure." ■

Just a minute with Mike Ianiri...

Role models: My dad who was a migrant from Italy in the early '70s with just £20 in his pocket yet achieved so much in the IT industry. Also Steve Jobs for being a visionary and not giving up when the chips were down.

Your main strength and what could you work on? My strengths are not giving up on something, working to deadlines and communicating effectively. But I could work on switching off in the evening and weekends. That's difficult as a business owner.

If you weren't in ICT what would you be doing? I'd be a chef.

Tell us something about yourself we don't know: My nickname is 5 Star – figure that one out!

Three ideal dinner guests: Steve Jobs for his business acumen, Elon Musk for some investment and Kevin Boyer at IP Netix for after dinner speeches (if you know, you know!)

One example of something you have overcome: Being in a car accident in the middle of nowhere in Agra, India, after a heavy monsoon. The taxi was a write off and I hitchhiked a ride to Delhi with a guy who turned out to be the local mobster.

In hindsight: I would have been an early adopter of cyber security. The growth has been off the scale.

Biggest career achievement: Building a B2B IT and telecoms business from scratch at 25 and selling at 30, especially in such a competitive industry.

Industry wish: A single portal solution that APIs into all channel partner portals would be a game changer for resellers.

Top tip: Get involved in channel networking on a business and social level.



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Tempest's quest to divers

BT Wholesale Managing Director Alex Tempest is on a mission to increase female representation in the comms sector and springboard more women into senior positions. Here, she responds to key questions that widen the conversation.

What are the benefits to businesses of a strong female presence in boardrooms?

It's important that women are involved in the decision making process, both in and out of boardrooms. There is a plethora of benefits, ranging from providing new perspectives to networking opportunities and acting as a role model to other employees. For too long women have been sidelined in the channel. It's time they are heard, and I'm proud to be leading from the front at BT Wholesale.

How are you taking a lead on the issue of increasing female representation at the top in your business?

As Managing Director of BT Wholesale, I have continued my career-long dedication to achieving gender equality by shaping several career development initiatives within the business. To increase female representation at the top, it's important that we start from the bottom up. At the entry-level, BT has an apprenticeship scheme which onboarded

10 new apprentices in the last year alone. Eighty per cent of apprentices that qualified over five years ago are still with us today. By encouraging confidence in women from the start of their careers we can nurture the best talent as they rise through the ranks.

I have also evolved my approach to mentorship to look beyond gender alone, working to create an environment where everyone feels supported and can envision a career path for themselves in the channel – no matter their gender, race, sexuality, socio-economic status or otherwise. Far from being blind to their differences, this has meant mentoring each employee according to individual personality, value add and assessing the challenges people may face case-by-case.

Mentorship is not about making people follow all the rules, but empowering them to make up their own minds and contribute their own ideas. Ultimately, I want to empower my team to



Alex Tempest

For too long women have been sidelined in the channel. It's time they are heard

take risks, to be confident in their skill set and take the leap, whatever that might mean for them. This will naturally lead to more female representation at the top. Every employee needs to feel supported so women can thrive.

What initiatives and developments do you participate in to help increase the presence of women on boards in the wider industry?

I am committed to encouraging more women to have senior management positions in the channel

by improving mentorship opportunities, having helped to launch the TechWomen programme. The goals of the programme are to assist those in key commercial, operational and technical roles to develop their careers, with 95 per cent

ify boardrooms

of participants saying they felt confident driving their career following the course.

What more action needs to be taken to boost the number of women on boards?

There are a multitude of ways that we can boost the number of women on

to get women into senior roles, the best thing they can do is ask questions – and it's crucial that a bottom-up understanding is encouraged. This might be in the form of one-on-one conversations, collecting information anonymously, or reverse mentoring. Only by prioritising knowledge sharing can businesses understand the challenges facing women employees and encourage them to reach the top.

What barriers have you identified to having more women on boards and how is BT Wholesale addressing these challenges?

One of the main challenges to having more women on boards is the restrictive view that just this will result in sustained gender equality. For example, one of the main barriers to having more women on boards is the unequal balance of care-

giving responsibilities. It's essential that companies implement policies that equalise parental leave to allow women and men to have equal opportunities, as women are often disproportionately impacted.

BT Wholesale recognises that there's still a long way to go, but we're heading in the right direction. To ensure that we're always listening to our employees' needs we have implemented a Gender Equality Network which aims to challenge the business and inspire change in policy, process and the cultural norms that create gender equality.

How best can ambitious women influence their own ability to reach a board level position?

With tech spearheading innovation in almost every area of our lives, women need to be at the forefront so they have a say over the direction of progress.

Growing up with a twin brother helped highlight that women have been left out of the design of our collective world for too long. To influence their own ability to reach a board level position, women should get to know the sector they are in, network with a range of stakeholders and be authentic to themselves.

In your experience, has the comms sector in general made progress in recent years on increasing diversity at leadership level?

Every year we're seeing more and more women step into leadership roles in the industry and it's much more inclusive than it used to be. However, there is still a long way to go. I've been lucky enough to reach a leadership position, but I recognise this is an anomaly.

Our industry still feels male dominated so we can't take our foot off the pedal. I have made it my personal goal to get more women into the male dominated tech industry, and those already there into more senior positions.

Businesses that don't act on improving the diversity of their senior leadership committee will find that it's to their own detriment, fostering an echo chamber that won't breed the innovation the industry needs. ■

Businesses that don't act on improving the diversity of their senior leadership committee will find that it's to their own detriment, fostering an echo chamber that won't breed the innovation the industry needs

boards. Firstly, businesses can implement better recruitment policies. Statistics say that 39 per cent of businesses in the industry do not have a policy to recruit diverse candidates.

From anonymous applications to reducing the list of mandatory requirements on applications, there are many processes that can be put in place to encourage more women to apply for senior roles. What's more, businesses can ensure longer-term equality in recruitment by building a diverse workplace and removing bias through better training opportunities. For companies struggling

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Engerising Our Partners

Kaizen Direct moves smoothly into energy

Newly established Kaizen Direct has been built on over 20 years of experience in the telecoms market. The name Kaizen comes from the Japanese philosophy of 'continuous improvement' and the company now offers a unique service to SME customers to review, manage and implement modern voice communication technology across their business. This may be serving a single user with a mobile phone and pocket landline, right through to enterprise business and multi-site contact centres.

Kaizen's partnerships are of huge importance and the company has already secured 'best of breed' supplier deals with NEC, O2 and, most recently, Fidelity Energy.

Sales Director, Paul Brakewell explained the genesis of the Fidelity Energy partnership: "I knew of a previous company which had taken up the energy offering but did not progress with it. After I went self-employed, I was put in touch with Fidelity Energy through a partnership with Currys, and it really was a no brainer. To move forwards in business, you must look at recurring revenues and take on products with integrity in a competitive market. On top of that, the wide range of suppliers who offer upfront commissions is very attractive.

"Onboarding with Fidelity Energy was very easy. A lot is done in the background, and it is such a personal service which is testament to the incredible team which handles everything. I have a great relationship with my Internal Account Manager Jacob Flack and Business Development Manager Clare Stratford, who have been fantastic, and I have a call most days with them. It is a really friendly relationship and I see them as my energy team not as a second company."

Kaizen Direct aims to change the way that businesses engage with their telecom's provider by offering a consultative approach to business services and implementing the right changes for their business. Their account managed service allows customers to feel valued and 'part of the company' as Brakewell stressed: "We incorporated after the pandemic, which was a changing point for communications. As a company we have an offering that allows business to work in a more flexible manner and we assist other businesses to be able to achieve this. After the pandemic it allowed me to source the best



Kaizen Direct Sales Director
Paul Brakewell

products and offerings, such as energy, and deliver these solutions to companies.

"Energy is a very easy process and we have had success in many accounts and still have some ongoing. Fidelity Energy has taken the lead on pretty much all of it, so once I have handed over the bills, they take it from there and I have had little involvement in sourcing the prices. Business energy is extremely complex and for some of the trickier customer sites, they will even contact the customer as Kaizen Direct to answer any questions and offer the expert information straight to the customer. This gives my customers the best service and experience to ensure their energy is handled as professionally and efficiently as possible."

When asked if energy was a distraction to Kaizen's core business, Brakewell commented: "In communications, when you're discussing utilities, business energy falls into the same area on the billing platform. When we are looking to gain trust with our voice communications and IT services, it is an easy cross-sell, especially for our higher manufacturing plants who need someone to rely on to support them and offer advice alongside our products.

"As a business you must look at increasing revenue streams from any areas you can. If you are selling a service and have an opportunity to make the customer stickier and more engaged and give your business a fuller offering, then any business should consider the partnership.

"We would have been insane to ignore this revenue stream which with a small amount of additional effort can generate huge amounts of money for us," he concluded.

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Poised to propel Unify

Viegli has kicked off a no holds barred campaign to supercharge Unify's presence in the SMB sector and treble the size of the vendor's channel with a growing 'army' of small business resellers, according to Managing Director Robert Nunn.

Distributor Viegli's all-new Unify SMB channel expansion campaign removes all barriers to entry with no minimum spend commitments or requirement on numbers of seats sold. That's not all: For the first time Unify has opened its doors to all resellers no matter the size or shape of the telecoms, UC or IT business, and committed to a long-term product roadmap. "Unify has pledged to support and develop its SMB portfolio well into the 2030s," stated Nunn.

"Established names such as Panasonic and Samsung have exited the market and there's a plethora of 'me too' hosted providers and a constant race to the bottom on price. There isn't a vendor on the planet that can match Unify's 175 year heritage. Resellers can now take advantage of that pedigree and portfolio with no more discounting to compete with some other vanilla offering."

Nunn's objectives in terms of SMB market penetration and reseller numbers are

significant and ambitious. He plans to elevate Unify as the top UK hosted offering within two years, in doing so trebling the size of the Unify channel in terms of reseller count, which means recruiting between 150 and 200 new partners while being especially careful not to overdo the process and minimise the chances of Unify resellers competing with each other.

Viegli was appointed as the second UK & Ireland distributor for Unify in July 2021. It only supports the Unify brand and has vowed to 'never distribute another telecoms vendor'. "We were appointed to bring the channel into the new hosted era," explained Nunn. "We have taken the pain away with the hosted proposition. Almost no engineering or in-house skills are needed now, so for the first time ever one man bands can be official Unify resellers."

Unify (formerly Siemens) has always been a big name in the traditional on-premise marketplace, requiring resellers to have significant engineering and in-house



Robert Nunn

Everything we do is born from the frustration we had as a reseller

expertise to sell the product, which often created a barrier to entry. "But OpenScape Business brings all of the legacy features of PBX to the hosted arena, adding the UC bells and whistles that modern installs insist on," added Nunn.

Flexibility

He pointed up the solution's flexibility as being key in addressing the challenges of smaller businesses, citing its contact centre capability, mobility and UC aspects as well as a traditional reception offering. Other key factors include the removal of complexity and each client having their own virtual instance. "The

smaller end of mid-market (100-500 extensions) used to be the preserve of larger resellers with strong engineering and support teams," added Nunn. "But we're seeing smaller resellers win this business as the solutions have simplified."

To create associated opportunities for resellers Viegli will be adding ancillary products to its portfolio such as headsets (including the exclusive launch of a new range of headsets this month), network switching equipment and firewalls to create a one-stop-shop.

According to Nunn, and based on his past

experiences, smaller resellers have been let down by distribution. "Everything we do is born from the frustration we had as a reseller," he said. "The traditional distribution model simply ships licences and equipment and escalates faults to manufacturers, with nothing else to offer."

Nunn also noted that Viegli is poised to catalyse Unify's SMB market push with reseller support mechanisms primed in areas such as white label marketing resources, sales and product training plus engineering support. "Distribution for us is simple," added Nunn. "We only distribute one vendor per sector and specialise in reseller sales training and marketing support including white label assets and marketing kits. Remote or on-premise sales assistance is on hand along with client training if required. We believe that a well trained sales person selling Unify will win more business which is why our focus is on supporting the sales people. This is because we see distribution as a partnership, not an opportunity to just ship goods."

All of this will be music to the ears of resellers wedded to their traditional heritage in CPE and wanting to move more in step with the times. "Telecoms resellers with poor IP knowledge will struggle moving forwards," commented Nunn. "While the on-premise marketplace will still be here in five years time the need to understand IP, networking, SD-WAN and associated technologies will be key. We have a crucial role to play in this – supporting the channel with knowledge and expertise." ■

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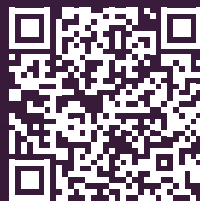
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Tough times, but Net Zero

The priorities of business leaders and the general population are being pulled in uncertain directions right now but keeping Net Zero goals at the forefront of our minds at this challenging time remains an obligated and common sense imperative, according to industry experts leading last month's Channel Forecast Insight Session.

Heightened awareness of climate change is key to the success of Net Zero endeavours, but given the cost of living plight, the uncertain economy, the effects of war in Ukraine and the ongoing energy cost crisis – are Net Zero considerations likely to remain top of mind or, relative to the pressing issues mentioned, be superseded in priority? According to Will Ennett, Head of Sustainability, TalkTalk, pushing forward on the climate agenda can benefit the challenges we face, and sustainability will remain top of mind. "A key element is the interconnectedness of the climate crisis to many of the macro challenges we face in the world today," he stated. "For example, most businesses now have a challenge in terms of energy prices."

Paul Harrison, EMEA Managing Director, Evolve IP, said his Net Zero objectives are clear: "We're going to be independent from energy companies and the global issues that affect energy prices. We'll be better off in the long run, but in the short-term how do we manage those costs and make it predictable for customers and employees to ensure they can battle

through this? We want to show them that it's present in our mind too as a business."

Every business faces the challenge of BAU and short-term targets, while sustainability and Net Zero can be more longer-term, noted Ennett. "But regulation is coming," he added. "Next year all plc companies have to work towards Treasury mandated reporting requirements for climate risks, strategy and reporting emissions (TCFD). Also coming down the track is IFRS in the finance world which will integrate sustainability reporting. That's keeping Net Zero front of mind. And a number of our largest partners have asked us for information on what we are doing about emission reduction."

Against this backdrop, measuring sustainability based on key benchmarks is key to success, noted Ennett. "We have been calculating and reducing scope 1 and 2 emissions for ten years, principally electricity usage in our data centres," he added. "The challenge now becomes scope 3, those areas outside our direct control. For every telecoms company and reseller the supply chain will be the largest source of emissions. This has allowed me to focus on our



Will Ennett

For every telecommunications company and reseller, the supply chain will be the largest source of emissions

business-wide strategy. Our supply chain is dominated by larger companies with resources to measure their footprint, but in the long-term some SMEs in our supply chain will struggle. We ran SME webinars during the summer on starting the Net Zero journey."

All-inclusive effort

Another barrier to carbon reduction success is staff buy-in, observed Harrison. "Trying to get the whole company involved on the

journey is a challenge," he stated. "You can only do this if you have everyone signed up to making sustainability a priority. More widely, we need to evangelise what sustainability can do for a business. We've been learning a huge amount to understand the benefits and get those USPs across. The journey to becoming carbon neutral has been an education curve."

The current crises impacting the world have not dented

the level of mindshare Harrison gives to green issues, and he continues to advance a strong case for keeping the sustainability conversation going in terms of technological benefits to businesses. "Hosted comms means using less power, making businesses more energy efficient," he added. "For example, we can generate a report for a PBX system in seconds that details its power consumption in terms of the handsets etc and what the carbon offset would be to remove the PBX.

"Once you start talking about this to partners it opens their eyes and shows a massive saving on that journey to carbon neutral. This is something different to talk about and is a definite USP. Customers want to go on that journey too – and they don't want unknown costs. Knowing they are playing a part in carbon reduction is key."

Harrison also noted that the majority of UK customers are using standard voice. "They don't collaborate but they will start to move that way, work more efficiently and take less journeys," he commented. "We've been through Covid and many more people are working from home, so we are looking at all aspects of that

focus sharpens

in terms of moving from an office-based workforce to a hybrid model with cloud-first and hosted telephony. We're working with partners to bring them on that journey."

Harrison pointed to Evolve IP's strong play in the hospitality sector to further demonstrate the benefits of energy management. "We work with hotels that may be suffering from low occupancy rates," he explained. "If a room is not occupied we can turn the power and phone off in that room, and take this to other verticals like education where facilities may not be used all of the time."

According to Ennett, another technological upside is the roll out of full fibre. "This should yield significant benefits," he added. "We conducted a study that found fibre to be approximately 80 per cent more energy efficient than traditional copper. This

won't happen overnight but we are confident about the trajectory."

TalkTalk is launching its Future Fibre Fund to help small businesses in Greater Manchester become more sustainable. Businesses can apply for grants to help them transition to low carbon technology, along with part investing in solar panels and energy efficient devices. "As part of that we'll offer training on how to start to measure carbon footprints," noted Ennett. "It's about mixing up the longer-term goals which may be hard to visualise with some of those real visual aspects that show you're making progress on the journey."

Consolidation factors

We have noted that carbon reduction success hinges on interconnected action within the supply chain. It also relies on the interconnectedness of acquired companies and their consolidation, observed

Harrison. "We are making acquisitions to grow the company so consolidation and global alignment reduces the number of data centres," he said. "Consolidating data centres is not an easy task. We'll likely go from 14 to six and still be compliant within regions around security elements for example. Scope 3 is where we want to get to. The quick wins for us are consolidation and talking about what the technology can do to improve more collaborative working. It's all about an education."

For its part TalkTalk has reduced the electricity consumption of its data centres and offices by about 15 per cent during the past three years. "That's helping the bottom line and helping us reach climate change targets," said Ennett. "We also signed up to the UN Race to Zero campaign committed to science based targets, which measures reductions in carbon footprint across all three scopes in absolute terms. This precipitated a big focus on scope 3 and in particular our supply chain, working with partners and creating procurement policies around what we expect from partners in terms of emissions reporting."

To those business leaders not yet motivated by the greater good, Ennett reiterated that there are also hard nosed business reasons to start thinking about a Net Zero strategy. "There is regulation with us today and coming down the track," he stated. "Investors are asking questions, and if customers aren't asking you now, they will be. So getting involved makes good business sense." ■



Paul Harrison

The quick wins for us are consolidation and talking about what technology can do to improve more collaborative working

How Technology Can Align Bosses and Employees in a Hybrid Working Environment

Hybrid work is here to stay. With recent discussions around people needing to return to the office and debates on the impact hybrid working can have on careers. Have we missed the point as to how we make this new working environment successful?

Evolve IP recently wrote an article questioning if bosses and employees were aligned. This debate was sparked by a recent news article about a lack of trust in the workplace and how bosses feel negatively about their employees working from home. It's time businesses work to support this new environment instead of fighting it.

Bosses need to listen to the positive impact hybrid working is having

We collaborated with Cisco in this debate and used their research around the current hybrid working environment. Cisco's 2022 Global Hybrid Work Study found that 61% of employees believe that their quality of work has improved since shifting to a hybrid environment. Cisco also highlighted several key benefits of hybrid work enjoyed by workers. 8 out of 10 employees said the ability to work from anywhere has made them happier, while 76% reported that working from home had saved them money. However, not everything was such a positive story with only 1 in 4 employees feeling that their organisation was "very prepared" to support hybrid working.

Businesses should be prepared for hybrid working and to be prepared they need to have the correct unified communications in place to facilitate their hybrid workforce. The right technology provides you with the data and analytics to manage employees effectively and provides the transparency a business needs to measure success and to

highlight any issues that need to be addressed.

How can technology support mending the negative feeling towards hybrid working?

Do you understand your call volumes? Is your team managing customer queries effectively? These questions can be answered by adding an omnichannel solution and business analytics to your communication strategy. This will provide you with the data you need to make significant business decisions.

Do you know what customers are asking? Are you aware of the main issues that are coming up from inbound queries? Call Recording can support this. Much more than a tool to monitor your staff but to flag any reoccurring problems within the business so you can improve processes and create any additional resources to reduce reoccurring issues.

Does your team have the tools to collaborate effectively? Are they able to share files, make calls, send messages, and work seamlessly across departments? Collaborative Voice Solutions can help with this, options like Webex or Microsoft Teams are voice solutions that offer this level of support.

Collaborative technology is how a business thrives in the future workplace. To attract new talent, create a positive culture, and have happy employees – hybrid working is something that needs to be embraced. Unified Communications offers businesses the technology they need to enhance communications, build trust and help their businesses thrive in the modern working environment.

To find out more about Evolve IP – contact the team at www.evolveip.uk +44(0)292 002 0380

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Kneen talks strategy

Incoming Content+Cloud CEO Geoff Kneen exemplifies the importance of having a forward-looking and all-embracing strategy, especially in a fast evolving technology marketplace.

Last year Content+Cloud – which has more than 1,000 people and a turnover of £120 million – was acquired by Advania Group, establishing the Nordics-based IT service provider’s first regional presence beyond its homeland. In September this year former Content+Cloud CEO Peter Sweetbaum moved to the parent business as Head of New Markets, creating an opening for Kneen who served as Group Managing Director for more than five years and is now tasked with driving Content+Cloud’s organic growth and M&A journey as Chief Exec.

He has 20 years experience in technology and transformation businesses and started out by qualifying as a mechanical engineer through a sponsorship with a large Swiss pharmaceutical business in the early ‘90s, later becoming involved in the automation of production facilities in the UK. “These were my first experiences of the power of IT to transform how businesses operate,” he stated.

Kneen went on to become director of an industrial IT

control systems business which sold to Atkins at the turn of the century. Post-acquisition he ran Atkins’ management consultancy operation, the aerospace and defence business and was IT director for UK and Europe. “I have always been engaged in technology either directly or through running technology enabled businesses,” added Kneen. “It is a great sector to be part of, especially now as we head into another period of convergence around tech, comms and applications.”

Kneen founded IT Lab in 2000 and Content+Cloud became the brand after acquiring Microsoft technology specialist Content and Code in 2018. Following an interim period in which the IT Lab and Content and Code names were preserved the new moniker was launched in June 2020. “This followed a period of rapid growth in which many new brands, products and services were added to the portfolio through acquisitions,” explained Kneen.

Content+Cloud has a particular focus on helping organisations to capitalise on the capabilities and value of the Microsoft ecosystem.



Geoff Kneen

We should always be striving to make today better than yesterday and tomorrow better than today

“For the last few years this was focused on migration to the cloud,” said Kneen. “For the next few years it will be more about how we help clients use their data to make better decisions and utilise intelligent tools to automate manual processes.

“We are fast moving into a truly flexible DevOps approach in helping our clients as big bang transformations are becoming a thing of the past. Helping businesses incrementally improve through the rapid development of new solutions that automate processes and help people

deliver more efficiently and effectively is the landscape today. The fact we are truly cloud first, and with the depth of capability we have in the Microsoft platform, means that our opportunity to continue to grow and consolidate the UK market is significant and real.”

Ongoing convergence

Kneen believes there will be more convergence of the traditional reseller roles, which to a large extent influences Content+Cloud’s strategic market view. “Resellers want to add service capabilities to their offerings and this pushes them

towards becoming MSPs,” he added. “We look at it from the client perspective and the problems we can solve for them – so closer relationships, particularly with resellers, is definitely part of our planning. Offering services across strategy, digital transformation, managed services and support, cyber, voice, data and automation makes us a complete partner.”

Kneen observed that data is becoming an increasingly vital component in digital transformation, so much so that data analytics and intelligent automation are the next stages of delivering value through technology for Content+Cloud. “Harnessing data through AI and bringing next generation intelligence into business operations and offerings is essential,” he commented.

“Cloud platforms can accommodate much larger workloads when it comes to data analysis. So unlocking the potential of data through cloud services is where MSPs should seek to deliver value.

“It is also compelling that voice is becoming searchable data just as much as any other form of data through voice recognition and transcription capabilities. How we combine the analysis of these data sources and the streamlining of processes is where we are looking to develop the business.

Furthermore, we should always be striving to make today better than yesterday and tomorrow better than today. And any mark I make on the business will be made together with the expertise, energy and enthusiasm of those around me.” ■



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Driving positive change



Jo Lawrence

The lack of leadership diversity within the comms channel has been brought into sharp focus by Exertis which is driving for faster and comprehensive change.

Exertis has zoomed in on the percentage of women considered when promotions and hires are made. To this end the company has also set up three ERGs (Employee Resource Groups), one of them focused on women and headed up by Gemma Walters (Chair for Women), General Manager for Microsoft. "The purpose of our ERGs is to create a safe, supportive space for employees who share a common identity and to support under-represented employees in building a community, then educate the whole business about each community's lived experiences," said Walters. "This enables colleagues to work more effectively together and increases the talent from each of the three focal communities at all levels of the business."

The ERGs promote inclusivity and ensure everybody is given a fair chance to succeed regardless of background. "They commit to champion, mentor and coach individuals from all genders, ethnic backgrounds and sexualities, as well as celebrating major events and driving policy changes within the company," added Walters.

More specifically, her particular remit is to raise awareness of issues facing women in the workplace through networking, learning and procedural reinvention.

"We will be looking closely at how we recruit, retain and advance women," she added. "We will challenge ourselves and set goals that we can measure in all areas."

Think Plus One

To help boost the number of women on boards HR Director Jo Lawrence advocates the Plus One mindset as a great place to start. "This challenges people to think along the lines of... 'if you were to involve a woman, who would it be, and how could

Breadth and depth of thought across the board and different inputs is essential

she be involved in meetings and initiatives being worked on?'," explained Lawrence.

"Removing barriers that might make women feel conflicted between work and family commitments is also important. Being mindful of flexible working, especially start and finish times, is key to helping women feel confident and happier in their roles. Gender stereotypes around family, childcare and responsibilities still exist, and creating meaningful roles with career progression for part-time workers and those

with family commitments is something we focus on."

While research suggests that for a group to have an impact on decision making it needs to form 30 per cent of the whole, Lawrence says this is about more than gender. "Style of thinking needs to be taken into account, ethnicity and a whole range of factors – not just women," she said. "Breadth and depth of thought across the board and how you seek different inputs is essential."

Lawrence noted that different perspectives and working styles can be gained from a female presence on boards, which delivers a balance of mindsets. She says that ambitious women can most effectively influence their own ability to reach a board level position by believing in themselves, managing stakeholders well, seeking sponsorship and championing each other, adding that this formula for success applies to all females in the workplace.

Exertis' quest for parity is also reflected in progress made on gender pay gaps where they exist. Lawrence added: "Furthermore, our parent company DCC is running a mentoring scheme for hiring women which creates not only a network of female talent, but a support network for women in the industry." ■

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COMMS VISION CONVENTION 2022

THE NETWORK SUMMIT FOR ICT CHANNEL LEADERS

CONFERENCE REPORT



Contents

Channel experts unravel top priorities in the Golden Triennium and beyond	24-26
Tedesco rallies industry to unite and bridge UK's digital divide	27
Shuter on strategic vision and BT's full-scale digital transformation project	28-29
TalkTalk accelerates wholesale transformation following Virtual 1 acquisition	30-31
Flick calls for new era of true partnerships and broader industry collaboration	32-33
Pile talks strategy as headwinds pick up	34
Zen CEO conjures magical customer experiences	35
How top channel leaders move the dial on diversity and inclusion agendas	36-37
CityFibre confirms no let up in build pace	38



Industry experts unravel in the Golden Triennium

The comms sector is witnessing a step change in the importance of digital technologies to customers at a time when opportunities for channel firms to scale have perhaps never been greater. But maximising the potential of a transforming market means first understanding the critical catalysts and challenges, especially in the triennium before the 2025 switch off.

Against the back drop of industry and economic change Comms Vision 2022's opening super session provided a snapshot of the most important market trends together with a high level assessment of the channel's priorities ahead of the 2025 PSTN switch off and in the context of evolving markets, such as full fibre and 5G, as well as exploring competitive necessities.

The discussion highlighted a clear correlation between the potential for growth and the comms channel's hardy nature which habitually comes to the fore when times get tough, and is a driver for digital transformation and high optimism. "Look back to the last recession and we see that technology companies are resilient and good at helping customers find their way out of challenging times," said Dale Parkinson, Fixed Wholesale Sales Director, Virgin Media O2 Business.

According to Gavin Jones, Head of Channel, BT Wholesale, there are two primary factors that 'create a great opportunity'. "The build out of fibre networks and 2025," he stated, citing Ofcom stats that indicate the number of premises available for FTTP has risen from seven million to 11 million in the last year. "We have a compelling event in 2025 when the PSTN network, which is 35 years old, is being shut down," he added. "We haven't yet seen the technology drive that FTTP and all-IP will give us. There is much to be excited about."

David Barber, Strategy Director, Zen, noted that there is concern around a pending recession, but nevertheless the channel is entrenched

in opportunity. "Ultimately, the technology and solutions we provide are the foundations of businesses in the future," he said.

For the industry, people are the most powerful lever for growth and every channel business should manage staff for the greatest impact, observed Matthew Worboys, Business Development Director, Gamma. "One action point is to double down on investments in people," he stated. "If you have a hungry sales force then you will succeed as we have the perfect storm of customers looking to change their technology."

Worboys believes there are two clear opportunities in front of us – the 2025 PSTN switch off and

We haven't yet seen the technology drive that FTTP and all-IP will give us. There is much to be excited about

the rise of hybrid working environments. But opportunities are not limited to these areas. There are many uses for the technology provided by channel businesses and key to their success is the plumbing, according to Andrew Wilson, Sales Director, Wholesale Channel, CityFibre.

"Technology is a weapon," he commented. "We all know that the best way of gaining efficiency in this market and climate is the use of technology, but we need a state of the art full fibre infrastructure to underpin that tech and support economic growth.

Right now, we're lagging behind as an economy and the faster we build the more opportunity we create for the channel and customers."

To drive a greater proportion of revenue in all markets Parkinson advises resellers to look at three areas. "I'd first look at my suppliers and want them feeding into me as partner, which means being commercially flexible, commercially innovative, and giving me a set of propositions that will cut through to customers," he stated. "I'd also try and protect any budget I had for automation, whether it's integrating into supply chain systems or providing customers and partners with additional tools. Thirdly, double down on what we are good at doing for customers and why they

bought from us in the first place. These are no regret decisions."

No doubt consultancy is a powerful driver for growth, but the need for detailed

conversations with customers is also catalysing demand for more complex solutions. "To meet what companies are trying to achieve and how end customers are seeking to differentiate you need platforms," pointed out Neil Wilson, Product Strategy Director, TalkTalk Wholesale Services. "You've got the rise of SD WAN which is complicated and there isn't an abundance of engineers and architects to construct those environments and maintain them. There is a real opportunity to do that on behalf of customers. It's also important to take as many steps as possible



channel's top priorities



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away from transactional relationships into a trusted advisor and consultancy type position where you are adding more value and helping to grow their business, innovate faster and reach new markets."

Tangible outcomes

Success will also primarily be driven by tangible and easily understood outcomes, noted Adam Cathcart, Managing Director, Onecom Partners. "There is a requirement to move away from a focus on the technology and look at the benefits it delivers," he stated. "If we can present the value of what technology delivers and see a reward of 10 per cent or 15 per cent increase in efficiency, this will create more opportunities for the channel."

Growth is a top priority for most business leaders and ambitious channel players are also keeping a close eye on the rise of full fibre deployments. CityFibre's Wilson noted that as build programmes mature a more competitive environment will emerge and have a big impact on businesses, a trend that must not be ignored. "If you don't react quickly enough in this market someone else will eat your lunch," he commented. "The opportunity, size and scale is not quite there to make the big impact today, but the rate that alternative network providers are building will see the opportunity create itself, and it's coming a lot quicker than people think."

To remove any doubts about the future role of full fibre deployments Jones shared insights into the rate of adoption witnessed by BT Wholesale. "The investment to date in terms of fibre roll out has been predicated in more residential areas," he said. "Many of the partners we work with address the SME, the SoHo and larger

People are the most powerful lever for growth and every channel business should manage staff for the greatest impact

businesses. The coverage and footprint isn't there yet. But, 62 per cent of my weekly orders are for fibre based connectivity – in Q4 last year that was 50 per cent and in Q3 37 per cent – so the statistics indicate exponential growth."

Growing opportunities

Wilson also says that the size of the opportunity is not obvious at the moment but nonetheless it's strengthening behind the scenes. What is clear for all to see is the sustainability impact of full fibre infrastructure which is seven-and-half times more efficient to run. "Running full fibre significantly improves carbon footprints," said Wilson. "And

looking globally at fibre roll outs, churn is far less. Once you are on fibre infrastructure you stay."

Even better, Barber believes that full fibre investment will create solutions we haven't even thought about. "It will drive innovation, however, fibre is under-disruptive and for true innovation we need to see the investment in full fibre networks distribute more around B2B coverage, the not-reached areas and those stuck with a variant product. There is a long way to go with full fibre but it will drive the biggest change."

Wilson expects discussions around full fibre to mirror those experienced by Barber in relation to broader digital transformation. "The conversations partners have been trying to have with disengaged customers previously are now being driven by customers," he said. "And the conversations we have with partners now are around how we equip them to deliver against digital infrastructure and the move away from analogue. It's great to see that response."

Whether the run up to all-IP and the PSTN closure will turn out to be a growth multiplier is open to question given the lack of awareness
Continued on page 26



Continued from page 25

among many businesses, observed Worboys. "There was strong government messaging around the analogue TV switch off and we haven't seen the same when it comes to the PSTN shut down," he stated. "There is more to do around that. And there is an incredible number of PSTN lines still to switch. One of the biggest challenges is managing number porting with the migration of data – the provisioning time can be excessive. So making sure there is a process that is simple to consume is important."

Cathcart expressed a note of pessimism about the chances of getting over the line in 2025. "We have seen changes and mixed messages coming out so we spend a lot of time working with partners to make sure they know what the impact is, almost at a granular level," he said. "For example, what customers to target. My hunch is that we will get to a stop-sell in 2023 but I can see 2025 being pushed out as I'm not sure the technology is fully available to deliver it."

Rising co-opetition

However, there is more clarity around the upsides of co-opetition which could help unlock opportunities quicker among resellers with differing specialities and a predilection to partnering, believes Cathcart. "We'll start to see more engagement between resellers bringing different skills sets," he commented. "Especially as products and technology evolves. People will work more collaboratively but with that comes risks – you need to make sure there are clear rules of engagement and that it's monitored regularly because business models and approaches to selling, for example, can change."

One area of possible collaboration is around security which is fast rising up the comms channel's agenda. Most notably, the increase in home working has coincided with a big hike in cyber attacks, and the comms industry has traditionally been one layer below where the cyber attacks take place, but that's changing, particularly with the new hybrid workforce.

Security matters

This raises a cardinal question: Is the industry doing enough to protect customers? "As we see the proliferation of working from home, and washing machines having Wi-Fi, security

Consultancy is a driver but detailed conversations with customers are also catalysing more complex solutions

will become more and more important," stated Jones. "If I had one wish it would be to launch a brilliant security product to the channel. Security is top of mind and super-important."

According to TalkTalk's Wilson, another transformational change the channel could deliver is the 'proper' end-to-end automation of services. "Ultimately, customer experience is what end customers buy," he commented. "It's what resellers and people in the channel sell on. You have to differentiate and we as an industry need to focus on how to deliver a competitive advantage."

Key to gaining a competitive advantage in the future will be transformational 5G services. Jones

noted that we are still at an early stage with 5G but EE expects to cover 50 per cent of the UK population by 2023 with ubiquitous coverage by 2028. The primary uses cases will centre around ultra low latency communications and mass machine type communications (IoT). "These will be seminal and we will see them rise," said Jones.

A big industry question often asked when 5G enters the conversation is whether it will become a replacement technology for fixed lines. Parkinson was clear in his response. "We don't see fixed and mobile as a choice," he stated. "They are complementary technologies. If you think about

fully dense fibre right up to the edge of the network and having applications and services running for healthcare and consumers in a smart city, that's when you

bring the power of fibre and 5G together and make it real for businesses. Both technologies enhance one another and all of the work we are doing on 5G and fibre is about delivering real outcomes that people can understand and engage with, and can stimulate demand."

The super session began by asking whether the channel can thrive in turbulent times, and whether resellers can adapt to turn a challenging economic situation to their advantage. As far as Worboys is concerned, the answer is an emphatic 'yes'. "The channel is often seen as the place to be," he said. "You have businesses that are particularly well run, mostly cash positive, so their ability to pivot and change is second to none." ■

Tedesco urges industry to bridge UK's digital divide

It is the comms sector's responsibility to create a common purpose that expands and drives programmes to help close the digital divide, argues Diego Tedesco – Director, Wholesale Fixed – Virgin Media O2 Business.

In his address to delegates Tedesco urged the industry to come together and tackle what he sees as one of the biggest issues facing the UK today – the requirement to create a more inclusive digital society, in part by helping disadvantaged people across the digital divide. “The most important topic for the industry is levelling up,” he stated. “This means every corner of our society having equal access to opportunities and prospects. It's a bold vision and a big task.”

Tedesco noted that 20 per cent of the UK lives in social housing and many are vulnerable and lack digital resources. He pointed up a digital inclusion pilot bringing together telcos, social housing providers and local authorities in Manchester, where Virgin Media O2, BT, Hyperoptic, TalkTalk and Vodafone worked together to assess the minimum standards for connectivity in social housing. “Connectivity has a huge part to play in the levelling up agenda,” he added. “Most take for granted the day-to-day activities done via digital yet many parts of society have no access to connectivity.”

Digital literacy and work-ready skills are also creating digital disparity, especially when we consider the extent to which Covid-19 shifted many activities and services online, including learning and jobs. “Connectivity and up-skilling is a societal imperative, but it doesn't happen quickly enough,” added Tedesco.

In October, Virgin Media O2 Business began offering free digital skills training delivered potentially by more than 2,000 company volunteers working with local authorities and the public sector across the UK. The campaign forms part of Virgin Media O2 Business' Connect More programme and builds on Virgin Media O2 research which



found that the UK's digital skills gap is costing the economy £12.8 billion, with 5.4 million people unable to carry out simple digital tasks.

“We can't level up unless we have a digitally skilled workforce – which is a societal challenge,” said Tedesco. “Digital skills are connected to better paid jobs, so those lacking skills are locked out of job opportunities and learning. There is an opportunity to make a big change but we need to join forces and collaborate.”

Digital infrastructure

According to Ofcom eight million UK households struggle to pay for connectivity, while access is a problem for others. Tedesco says the industry can work towards bridging the digital divide in a way that provides greater access to digital infrastructure and supports local economies. “Underpinning this is the fibre roll out, but it needs to reach

more rural areas,” he added. “Thirty four per cent of rural businesses rate their connectivity as poor, so access to digital infrastructure is not equal. They are disadvantaged when it comes to attracting talent and enterprise investment.”

Efforts to reduce digital disparities could be further challenged by turbulent times as the UK faces into a possible recession, a scenario that is feared to widen the digital gap. “There may be pressure to cut public spending and investment into digital programmes, which will deepen and widen the digital divide,” warned Tedesco.

These pressures underscore the importance of stepping forward to help connect everyone to the digital future, urged Tedesco. “We want to expand our Connect More programme through the industry,” he added. “We must collaborate. It's important to work together.” ■



Shuter on strategic vision digital transformation project

To say that BT is radically reconfiguring its business model would be to greatly understate the extent of the digital transformation underway. In his Comms Vision fireside interview, Rob Shuter, CEO, Enterprise at BT, shared insights into how the business is navigating the complex transition by taking leaps, not steps.

Of course, digital adoption is a priority for all businesses, but for those the size of BT it adds new dimensions to a task involving the near complete dislocation from its past. "We have a lot of work to do to give our customers, partners and channels a modern digital experience," said Shuter. "There is transformation at all layers of the pyramid with BT deploying networks and infrastructure, bringing people up to speed and making sure we have the propositions that make us a partner of choice for some of the big platform providers. We need a BT that couples the benefits of the networks and infrastructure, the resources of a secure partner with the agility and innovation seen in smaller entities. It's a big challenge, particularly as so much is changing."

Navigating the tipping point where scale meets agility must be achieved while mastering the challenges of modernising the wholesale model by deploying a digital solution stack, which is also a top priority. "We've needed a transformation in the wholesale channel for many years," added Shuter. "We are embracing that change with a multi-million pound programme and a new portal for partners.

"The industry needs innovation from wholesale providers. Partners are more demanding, they see what's possible when using Amazon, for example. Expectations have risen significantly for digital experiences like easy straight-through processing, single order and digital migration. And we are all under pressure to

be efficient and commercially successful. The markets are tough and the macro picture is not helping, so we all need to up our game."

This is no time to sit on the sidelines and tomorrow's winners will be those who execute their digital transformation strategies today. For BT that means transforming the networks to next generation and bringing propositions into a whole new world. "Then there is the transformation of systems, culture, mindset, diversity and commercial orientation," added Shuter. "This

The industry needs innovation from wholesale providers. Partners are more demanding and expectations have risen for digital experiences

amounts to a complex four layer transformation – but there are many proof points that show we are making progress. I would hope that our partners see a more commercially oriented, customer focused BT than a year or two ago."

Critical intersections

Shuter is a 'great believer' in the power of culture and has taught about the intersection between strategy, execution and culture. "It is a great truism that culture eats strategy for breakfast," he stated. "Organisations don't change but people do, and the thing I've learned during my 30 years

in business is that the biggest gap in the world is the gap between knowing and doing. We struggle to get ourselves organised to execute and make new habits. This is a big part of our cultural challenge to build a company that is agile, commercially oriented, customer oriented, and not relying so much on legacy services. That's the way we're going to be successful going forward."

Having a diverse workforce and diverse management is critical to achieving these goals, believes Shuter. "Bringing in people with different skills and different mindsets is fundamental," he commented. "And I'm a great believer in the power of diverse teams. We've made progress here and my executive leadership team has a 50-50 gender mix. We weren't close to that before. Diversity

has so many different elements and there is a lot of work that still needs to be done. If we want a vibrant diverse industry with the best talent, then there is no choice but to embrace diversity."

Shuter has always worked in industries he felt were doing something useful in the world. In comms that relates to connecting people and transforming the way companies work, for example. His first job in telecoms was, as a student, working on the residence switchboard to make ends meet. He went on to work in the banking sector and returned to comms in 2009. "Banking is a traditional industry



on and BT's full-scale



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run in a modern way, and telco is a modern industry run in a traditional way," said Shuter.

But for how long? "Many of us grew up in the analogue-to-digital age," stated Shuter. "Today, it's a digital-first mindset. It's also hybrid-first. In the old days the fixed and mobile worlds were separate, now there is an opportunity for these networks to come together. Customers are looking for convergence in how they buy and how solutions are delivered. It's not just about billing and bundling – it's about the hybrid experience."

Furthermore, the 2025 PSTN switch off is a 'massive change' for the industry, observed Shuter. "This infrastructure upgrade is a once in a generation event, and in times of change there are both opportunities and challenges," he added. "Rolling out infrastructure creates opportunities for digital transformation for customers and a new conversation around how partners can help them."

Success factors

"Generally, there is a commercial benefit to moving customers onto modern networks. The successful

players in the industry are those that lean in to adopt new technologies as fast as possible and have a positive story for their customers."

Not surprisingly, as digital technology continues to overturn ways of doing business, customers and partners are looking for a digital experience from infrastructure providers. "It's also important to have the right partnering approach," stated Shuter. "BT wants to marry the strengths of having digital networks across fixed and mobile coupled with great offerings and a partnering mindset." ■



TalkTalk accelerates wholesale following Virtual 1 acquisition

The big opportunity for supply chains in the channel is to become drivers of positive change and partner growth, rather than remain wedded to old-world service functions. Especially in the context of economic challenges where responsiveness, flexibility and innovation will be key to success.

In her Comms Vision keynote TalkTalk Group CEO Tristia Harrison assessed the impact of current economic volatility and uncertainty on multiple fronts without exemption, and what these macro factors mean to the channel with a particular focus on connectivity supply chain innovation. But first she said the relative performance of channel organisations in tough times against other less resilient industry sectors is impressive, praising the channel's key pillar of entrepreneurialism.

"This could be seen as a tough time with a hard hand to play, but with adversity comes an enormous opportunity for us all to step up and show what this extraordinarily resilient sector can do," she stated. "These are unprecedented times for our industry and society. We've all emerged bleary eyed out of Covid and are now facing different but just as tough economic events. The macro and micro trends, cost of living crisis and high inflation are eroding spending power. People and company incomes are often trailing behind outgoings to a degree we haven't seen for decades. It's a new environment and customers are feeling the pinch."

But the route to success for resellers is to be clear-headed and focused on deploying vital resources such as high grade connectivity for customers, which could help channel partners to outperform their peers, believes Harrison. "High bandwidth connectivity has never mattered more," she added. "Usage is on the up. People want and need bandwidth and higher speeds and are prepared to pay a little more for something that is essential to their lives."

According to Harrison, the connectivity market, and the broader IT market, are at a major pivot point. "Competitive supply is a reality with dozens of fibre builders building at pace," she commented. "If Government and Ofcom realise that customer take-up in its broadest sense is fundamental and just as important as build, this new environment will unlock greater bandwidth and speed for businesses of all sizes across the UK."

TalkTalk is continuing with efforts to build a resilient channel supply mechanism and to

If Government and Ofcom realise that customer take-up in its broadest sense is fundamental and just as important as build, this new environment will unlock greater bandwidth and speed for businesses of all sizes

sustain its long-term growth initiatives, which required, for the sake of rapidity, a new acquisition strategy made possible by a take private that restored TalkTalk's entrepreneurial can-do culture rooted in B2B and wholesale. "It's 18 months since Executive Chairman Charles Dunstone, the board and our private equity partner Tosca and I took the business private," explained Harrison. "The major reason was to give us the space and time to invest in the growth of our wholesale platform serving businesses and consumers.

"The quarterly reporting timetable of a public company is just short-term. Today, happily we are in a long-term phase. We want to grow and invest. We are also investing in FTTP functionality. We spent many years completely integrated into Openreach's systems selling copper services. We are now integrating fully with CityFibre and are investing in scaling alternative networks."

Dislocation from Openreach is a pressing challenge, born out of the requirement to reimagine TalkTalk's channel operating model and deploy

the right technology to accelerate change and improve the drive for growth, as well as ensure the transformation is sustainable over time. By applying its end-to-end supply chain expertise in the altnet space, facilitated by a smart capabilities approach and relationships

with certain alternative network providers, TalkTalk aims to create an agile and streamlined channel strategy that responds to the current challenges faced by resellers looking to deliver a sustained fibre-based strategy.

"We were founded originally to drive competition and that remains true," added Harrison. "We have a FTTP network across a range of builders: Openreach is building at scale and we have a long-term agreement with CityFibre, Community



Wholesale transformation



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Fibre in London and Freedom Fibre in the north west. We are completely agnostic as to builder and will connect with organisations that are well funded with excellent customer service and can build with quality. Competition brings fantastic pricing. It's a fascinating time in this space."

Key acquisition

Altnets are becoming more common but Harrison's selective criteria will likely make for a more sustainable advantage. And against this backdrop of supply chain transformation, going private enabled TalkTalk to make important M&A decisions, acquiring smart aligned businesses (and customer bases). Earlier this year the company purchased Virtual 1, primarily for its capability in automation and portal experiences, its voice services, SD WAN, cloud, security, colocation etc. Couple that with TalkTalk Group's national scale, its major backhaul investment and tier one critical infrastructure, and you have a more compelling proposition.

Virtual 1 CEO Tom O'Hagan increasingly realised that a direct approach was needed to drive his company's expansion plans, and that doing so through a sale to TalkTalk would bring new opportunities for both businesses and their channel partners. He quantified the benefits of uniting

Virtual 1's operations and practices with TalkTalk in his Comms Vision fireside interview. "Virtual 1 is good at automation, APIs and portals, but our network was 300 points of presence," he stated. "We were lacking network scale and TalkTalk has 3,000 points of presence. Combine Virtual 1's capability with TalkTalk's scale and you have something game changing. I got excited about that. Now, Virtual 1's SDN capability is available across the whole TalkTalk network.

"And because we have a national network and RFI there is an opportunity to aggregate altnets locally. It's difficult for resellers to bring those relationships together, but we can do that through a single pane of glass, the API set and wrap the SDN technology around it. Partners can buy a CityFibre or ITS connection now and can turn the bandwidth up our down in 40 seconds, whereas it may take 40 working days elsewhere."

O'Hagan also noted that Virtual 1 is developing more thought-provoking innovation, adding: "An end customer portal is in development and will be launched next year, enabling end customers to log-on and make changes themselves seamlessly. We'll give that to the channel to help partners win more business with this USP."

The Virtual 1 acquisition prompted TalkTalk to revisit its wider strategy which led to a fundamental restructure within the business. Harrison explained: "We've streamlined our wholesale platform into distinct consumer and business divisions. There is a world of difference between the two. For example, the business division has Ethernet and provisioning at scale. In Q2 we took 45 per cent of all the net new Ethernet volume from Openreach."

Being clear about the big bets to win in the future is also about gaining some strategic clarification from a look into the rear view mirror, and reconnecting with where the journey began. "TalkTalk Group's founding mission remains the same," added Harrison. "It's 20 years since TalkTalk acquired Opal Telecom to provide affordable easy-to-do-business-with connectivity for homes and businesses. Now, we have four million homes across the wholesale and consumer divisions, we serve 450,000 business and circa 1,000 partners. And we will continue to fight for competition with regulators and government. While these are difficult times I feel enormously optimistic about what people in this industry can deliver together. It's always been the case that in adversity we move forward, and we can keep this country connected for the next generation."



Flick calls for new era of broader industry collaboration

The more challenging and complex the business environment becomes, then the efficacy of channel partnerships should come under greater scrutiny, according to Onecom Group CEO Martin Flick. And possibly, the stakes have never been higher given the macro trends, making partnerships more critical.

In his Comms Vision fireside interview, Flick claimed broad usage of the term 'partner' has catalysed the need for a realignment of the word's definition, bringing to heel rampant misconceptions and misuses. "The term 'partner' has been much used over the years with bigger organisations describing their channel resellers as partners," he stated. "They don't mean partnership with authenticity. We want to change that convention and truly work in partnership."

One of Flick's key principles is that increased collaboration with partners will create greater value over time. "Collaboration is all about working with organisations that share commonly aligned goals, that are honest with each other, transparent as far as possible and work to a common agenda," added Flick. "You develop opportunities together that are commercially sustainable over time."

Among other upsides, true partnerships unite complementary capabilities that provide access to new markets, noted Flick. And Onecom Group has a history of forging partnerships that strengthen its strategy through greater capabilities and support, to better serve customers and address business issues. Its alliance with Vodafone is a strong case in point. "The relationship with Vodafone is mutually beneficial and goes deeper," added Flick. "We have openness and honesty, we work together through good and bad times, and during the pandemic Vodafone helped us. We were able to support staff and customers as a result. The partnership has real strength."

It must be said at this juncture that Vodafone is not Onecom's only strategic partner, but as an

oven-ready case study it offers a fresh perspective on the structuring of a winning strategy in which both sides can harness the power of experienced teams of experts. "It's about using the partnership mentality to bring propositions to life," added Flick.

He cited one example of a strategic collaboration which removed the barrier of requiring an open API that would take too long to develop, inhibiting Onecom's route to market. "We developed AI-enabled virtual agents in our own front end that interact with Vodafone's front

Collaboration is about working with organisations that share commonly aligned goals, are honest, transparent and have a common agenda

end web environment," explained Flick. "This gave us an accelerated route to automation and digitalisation of the product set before Vodafone could even contemplate opening up API access. Furthermore, technology we have developed will take the Vodafone IoT proposition, translate the data and turn it into workflows and work streams for customers to act upon."

It goes without saying that avoiding unsuccessful partnerships is the best course of action, and Flick highlighted his basic rules of thumb when reconsidering partnership requirements and structures as a route to growth. "Think about what you want from a partnership, think about your

objectives as an organisation, think about whether you align with the people you're partnering with – if not, change your partner," he stated. "Working in partnership in the true sense of the term means building ambitious plans together, working out what good looks like, measuring progress together and holding each other to account."

Any rethink of just how strategic 'strategic partnerships' are should always take into account the expertise on offer that could make a difference. For example, Onecom Group's relationship with

Vodafone means that by proxy channel partners can become a strategic partner of Vodafone overnight. In a new development, Onecom Partners is also launching a Strategic Partner programme, an

initiative that, among other advantages, enables partners in this tier to benefit from one of Onecom's exec team in a non-exec consulting role, helping with business planning, strategy and M&A capabilities if required. "Equally, we can learn from partners at the coalface who are living it every day," added Flick.

Over the years Onecom Group has developed a tried and tested approach to structuring partnerships. The company was established 20 years ago and has built a base of 70,000 business customers, with the direct business supplying in excess of half a million endpoints to corporate citizens across mobile, telephony



f true partnerships and



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and connectivity etc. "We have ambitious plans to continue to grow but investing in the direct sales team comes with huge risk and big cost," stated Flick. "It was obvious that to accelerate growth a lower end channel play would be a faster and more efficient route to market, to gain more share and to build momentum. We made a strategic decision to buy 9 Group and evolve the business to harness its power and capability."

The acquisition augmented 9 Group, the channel arm later rebranded as Onecom Partners, with the expertise and alliances within the parent business that are a benefit to end customer organisations. In practice, implementing the dynamic channel partnership model means operating as a separate entity. "It's important that partners feel comfortable that there is no conflict," added Flick. "I've been a channel partner myself and always had that fight with direct teams – it's frustrating and annoying. Our philosophy is to say yes Onecom Partners is part of the Onecom Group and benefits from that

scale, at the same time there is a clear demarcation between the two business units, with different systems and different finance functions. The only commonality is HR and culture, everything else is distinct with solid rules of engagement in place."

Protecting the partner channel

In the last 20 months since the acquisition there have been three instances where a direct sales team was bidding against a partner's team, and in each case Onecom Group pulled the direct team out and the partner went on to win the deal. That authentic partnerships such as those promoted by Onecom Group are critical to business success is also reflected in Flick's assessment of how best to maximise the market opportunities at hand and thrive in ever toughening times. "Focus on customer need and delivering solutions that are federated across multiple technology stacks and deliver tangible business outcomes," he stated. "The key is to work in solid partnership with up-chain suppliers and strategic partners, and with

the partner channel on the ground which is best placed to leverage proximity to customer need and deliver solutions that will uphold growth."

Flick also put forward a compelling argument for cross-industry collaboration to tackle what he sees as the biggest area of weakness in the comms sector – the lack of application development skills. He called for relevant parties to work increasingly closer together on app development as part of a progressive business model which could signify a new world of breakthrough partnerships.

"There is a shortage of imagination, resource and skills in development, and we should share more often," stated Flick. "We have healthy competitors in what is a competitive market developing the same as us but at a slightly different pace. While we want to maintain a competitive edge there is a lot we can do to learn from each other as an industry and create an ecosystem that serves UK plc with a robust digital experience." ■

Pile talks strategy as market headwinds pick up

The economic outlook should be front of mind for resellers and the shape of a possible recession fully understood, believes Daryl Pile, Managing Director for Channel at Gamma.

In his Comms Vision keynote Pile imparted analysis of the UK economy and how the turbulence could impact resellers, as well as offering strategic recommendations to promote remedial preparation and growth. While the growth outlook for the UK has deteriorated Pile believes that for the short-term at least most channel businesses will be in fine fettle to weather the storm. "In the next 12 to 18 months most of us will be OK as we are in good financial health relative to some big corporations, but much past two or three years it gets exciting," he said. "Inflation is historically high so supply costs are going up. Interest rates are three per cent which means debt costs more and facilities for debt will become less available."

As market headwinds pick up investment into private industry will lessen, but the tap won't be turned off, believes Pile. "We're coming out of a purple patch where valuations have been high and money's been coming in, but it can't continue at that rate," he said. "Valuations have dropped – that said it's not a bad time to sell. If you are going to exit, time your run well. Do not put up the for sale sign and fail to get it away. Just like property, if a house comes back on the market questions are raised."

The outlook for larger businesses is also less clear as valuations have plummeted, with Gamma being a case in point. Pile cited that Gamma was previously at 20 x EBITDA and has reported strong results, yet the business now sits at 11 x EBITDA. The channel may have to ride the waves of a turbulent sea for some time, as Pile believes that the looming downturn could possibly be worse than Covid and likely to go on for longer. "There will be more casualties and we need to watch some of our suppliers,"



he stated. "It will become an issue in the supply chain, not during the next six to 12 months, but there are some big numbers out there that need to be refinanced, and you're talking about a tripling or quadrupling of interest rates."

Future growth

With pressure building it is a good time for business owners to look closely at their strategy and reassess their approach, addressing the big question – where will future growth come from? Among the hot spots Pile cited the UCaaS market which has 'massive' room to grow with eight million UCaaS seats taken in the UK, and Cavell forecasts a rise to 14 million. "Our market is like no other in Europe because it belongs to the channel," stated Pile. "Despite caution there will be opportunities and you need to strike."

Successful growth could also be underpinned by a strategic reset around value creation, noted Pile. "Understanding where you add value is

super important," he said. "Generally we do this by solving complexity across all products and disciplines. But you could also expand the portfolio, go deeper into particular product areas and become a master or sell to bigger customers."

Microsoft's growing market presence also represents an opportunity, noted Pile, who pointed out that resellers can monetise Microsoft by leaning into voice enablement, call recording and the associated support. "If you're not doing it now, dip your toe in the water with SIP trunking," advised Pile.

On establishing recession-proofing strategies, Pile added: "We have the ability to put rates up, with varying degrees of capacity to do this. Make sure you have the levers to pull if needed, and that you load the dice and stack Ts & Cs in your favour. Know what's going to happen and be ready to act. The ship hasn't sailed into the distance, but it's getting ready to leave." ■

Magical experiences

Businesses seeking to scale their competitive advantage would be wise to focus on their customer experience capabilities and associated opportunities to differentiate, emphasised Zen CEO Paul Stobart.

Stobart advocates a multidisciplinary approach to customer experience development and provided a holistic view of how to build teams that create and deliver the right differentiating experiences to customers. It is a common fact that customers who enjoy an exceptional experience will buy more and be more likely to adopt additional services or products. But business leaders who simply focus on being 'customer first' are getting it wrong, says Stobart, who went in to explain the must-dos.

"Customer experience is the single way we can differentiate," he stated. "Doing the basics well equates to a good customer experience, but that's not enough. We need to raise the bar for magical CX that creates an emotional bond with customers. Feelings matter, and going the extra mile can create a moment of magic."

The payback for getting CX right is real and Stobart iterated that unforgettable experiences start with an organisation's workforce. "It's about your people," he added. "You can't deliver a great CX unless your people are inspired to do so."

Multi-faceted approach

That makes it crucial to nurture high performing teams operating on the front-line, observed Stobart, emphasising a multi-faceted approach to raising the CX game which includes a reassessment of the recruitment process. "When recruiting we get obsessed by skills and qualifications and forget about people who may be a better fit and go the extra mile," he added.

Stobart noted that the delivery of sublime customer experiences starts with creating a superior employee experience with three key areas underpinning measurable gains – leadership, data and core values. "Leaders who 'get it' in a team understand a sense of 'us' – the shared values, visions and objectives, for example," explained Stobart. "A leader also needs to inject a sense of 'me' – feel valued, recognised and understood. A blend of 'us' and 'me' makes a team feel great."

He added that successful teams also need real-time intelligence in their hands, such as CRM,



Doing the basics well equates to a good customer experience, but that's not enough. We need to raise the bar for magical CX that creates an emotional bond with customers

giving them the data to make the right decisions. Meanwhile, insights into what matters to the business – its core values – are key for people to feel part of the fabric of what makes teams work.

Inclusive insights

"Furthermore, an understanding of corporate rituals and traditions within an organisation, such as celebrations, recognition events and anniversaries, along with nostalgia stories

about what the company has done in the past, all creates an inclusive understanding of what matters most," commented Stobart.

"But if delegation isn't your strategy you're doing it wrong. There is no point in all of this if you fail to empower team leaders. You need to give them authority to do CX that's great. Do all of this and you have a chance of teams creating moments of customer experience magic." ■

How top channel leaders diversity and inclusion agendas

D&I targets and progress made against them are starting to drive workforce transformation within channel firms. This Comms Vision super session assessed key programmes in place, advances made and what more needs to be done.

We all know businesses that succeed in becoming more diverse and inclusive tend to be a magnet for top talent, are more likely to be innovative and among many other upsides have an improved bottom line. That's not news. However, worthy of a headline is the progress made in multiplying the numbers of female talent in the comms sector in addition to broader advancements around diversity and inclusion in all its forms.

But what does delivering a D&I strategy involve, and what's being done to move the dial? This big question was unravelled by executive level panelists during an on-stage discussion at Comms Vision in which Zen CEO Paul Stobart shared insights into how the business is achieving incremental D&I gains, primarily as a result of forcing the issue. "We've been proactive and gone into local sixth form colleges and other forms of education to work with teams and explain that tech actually isn't frightening, it's not the domain of males and that women can add tremendous value," he commented.

"We also have a programme whereby only women are to be engaged and recruited into the business. We had to try all kinds of different ways to crack this one – it's not easy. We are 30 per cent female and it's ridiculous not to have a more balanced environment. That's the fact of this industry. But we are starting to get an increase in women coming into technical areas of the company, rather than back office and HR which are more familiar environments for women. Now, everyone is realising that women are adding incredible value and bringing a totally different dynamic to the way teams operate. The flood gates are open but we had to force it by being proactive."

TalkTalk is also investing in different stages of the local education chain in an effort to create a more diverse hiring pool. "We can have all the goals in the world but if the people are not out there to hire you have a limiting problem – we've got to change that," added Neil Wilson, Product Strategy Director, TalkTalk Wholesale Services.

Tackling unconscious bias

BT has witnessed significant forward movements in implementing a range of policies and initiatives to address challenges around bias, which is a common barrier to D&I progress. "We undertake training and test for unconscious bias, which is not necessarily comfortable," commented Gavin

Women are adding incredible value and bringing a totally different dynamic to the way teams operate

Jones, Head of Channel, BT Wholesale. "There are a number of other facets to creating the workforce of the future. For example, BT's senior leadership team have a reverse mentor. I was mentored by someone from a diverse group.

"We also have a number of programmes for career progression through the business designed specifically for women and ethnic minorities. Notably, 26 per cent of our senior leadership team are now women. That's not perfect but we are on the way. For example, when interviewing we recently introduced a mandatory diversity and inclusion target, which means that 40 per cent of candidates have to come from a diverse background."

Andrew Wilson, Sales Director, Wholesale Channel, CityFibre, noted that all colleagues have mandatory training on unconscious bias, what it stands for and the impact on the business. "We also have D&I forums and channels and are active in LGBT2 communities," he said. "We make sure we have awareness around supporting people. And our recruitment policies are multi-diverse in terms of panels, so we don't interview like-for-like."

Diversity and inclusion is far more than a board level issue because overcoming the challenges and meeting D&I targets depends (among other telling factors) on organisational culture as much as a high level inclusive leadership vision and

established processes. TalkTalk's Wilson stated: "A healthy culture becomes self-sustaining. It's not all about salary – people want to work somewhere they feel they belong,

that shares their values. This is important to attracting and retaining the right people."

Channel organisations are also taking strategic action to promote opportunities for women in tech, as well as other diverse groups, by boosting their representation through a revamp of traditional recruitment approaches. "We're challenging our routes to attracting people," said Helen Myers, Operations Director, Onecom Group. "This can involve social, apprenticeships and graduate programmes. We are looking at the spectrum of how we can reach a wider talent pool in a variety of ways. We challenge how we can move forwards, making sure we're keeping ourselves honest when looking at how

s move the dial on their



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we recruit and the diversity of the talent pool. Then we track how we evolve in terms of metrics to make sure we're not missing anything."

All-inclusive recruitment activity should be underpinned by broader engagement with potential candidates, believes Jones. "It's about changing the way you do things," he explained. "One of the faults we all make is that we recruit on capability to do the job now, when we should be recruiting on whether candidates can grow into that capability. This approach will give us a far wider candidate pool. Furthermore, you don't need to go to the top five universities nor look for straight As. Instead, look at how to get a wider range of capable people and use different measures to test their potential over and above a one-time exam."

Supporting the spread of diversity and inclusion is also about correcting other limiting approaches to the recruitment market. "You've got to look at job descriptions," added Jones. "We found that a lot of ours appealed to masculine type figures so we recoded them to attract a wider audience."

Having the right balance of skills is crucial for long-term success, but the pace of closing the skills gap remains slow. "We've had challenges in different areas of our business around the acquisition of people with developer and API skills – there is a real shortage," said Matthew Worboys, Business Development Director, Gamma. "But hybrid working means we are no longer constrained by geographic location. If you find someone

with the required skill set, virtual teams can be created to get the right outcome. And when you acquire talent it's important to nurture people and keep them engaged with the business."

On the talent gap, observed TalkTalk's Wilson, businesses can be guilty of thinking that innovation only comes from highly paid executives. "It comes from every level of the business if you are prepared

We all have aspirations of where to get to, that means changing the way you look at things

and have the right culture to listen to ideas – that's critical," he added. "Most of our initiatives come from right across the organisation."

Creating a health promoting workplace is also key to attracting diverse talent, observed Myers. "We create an environment where people can be open and feel comfortable about talking when they are struggling," she added. "There is someone there to support them. Everyone will struggle at times – we all have anxieties – and Covid gave us an appreciation of how the environment can get us down. So it's important to support people and the wider community. Most of this is about talking and having a route to take."

According to Dale Parkinson, Fixed Wholesale Sales Director, Virgin Media O2 Business, fostering a

diverse and inclusive workforce that goes a long way to plugging the skills gap is important enough to be super proactive and take immediate action. "Instead of bemoaning the skills shortage let's create new people with new skills," he stated.

"We all agree that the war for talent is alive and well and compounded by not just a technical skill gap but also a broader skills shortage. We have around 17,000 employees in the UK and our focus is on two key areas. Firstly, skills – rather than upping salaries we have created an early careers programme with a commitment to hire over 1,000 apprentices.

"And the expectations people have of their employers post-pandemic is high, so we revisited our employee policies and introduced an all-embracing leave package, while offering cost of living support to employees earning less than £35k a year."

As we have seen in this Comms Vision panel discussion, diversity and inclusion is now far more than an industry talking point – goals have been set, actions taken and progressive successes are in the bag – in the main achieved by driving ambitious change from a new perspective. "We all have aspirations of where to get to, that means changing the way you look at things," stated Jones.

And the proof of the pudding is in the eating... 41 per cent of BT's graduate intake last year came from diverse backgrounds. ■



No let up in build pace

A commitment to challenge the status quo lies at the heart of CityFibre’s accelerating expansion strategy along with a thriving people-first culture, according to Group Chief Operating Officer Simon Holden.



Having a strong visible presence where we build out our network is key: Visually, we say there is a change coming and it puts us in a position to help partners sell more

In his Comms Vision fireside interview Holden reasserted the pioneering altnet’s foundational strategic and market disrupting mindset. “CityFibre has grown with a challenger ethos and always with a vision that we are building a network for four big verticals – consumer, businesses, public sector and mobile,” he explained.

Holden also made the point that in the last three years CityFibre has hyper-scaled the business, currently building in 77 locations across the UK from Inverness to Plymouth. “We are deploying a huge amount of capital to roll out full fibre, driving scale and accelerating in this industry,” he commented. “We will see 2.5 million homes passed by the end of this year.”

A key objective is to build the most advanced digital infrastructure in the world, and do it efficiently to be price competitive, which is a must for any challenger. “That’s driven by an efficient roll out and an efficient service,” added Holden. “And having a network that is always up. This is work in progress but we have taken early life failures for businesses down to zero over the past three months.”

CityFibre continues to build the systems and processes that it needs to fulfil its lofty ambitions, and is in a strong position ahead of a likely recession that could impact investment in the fibre sector. “The market isn’t closed for funding and financing, but it will become more expensive,” added Holden. “We’re going through a classic

economic cycle – markets have become significantly more selective over the past six months.”

Happily fully funded, CityFibre recently underwent a strategic rebrand that correlates with increased demand. “Having a strong visible presence where we build out our network is key,” he explained. “Awareness is important for customers where we dig. Visually, we say there is a change coming and it puts us in a position to help partners sell more.”

CityFibre’s presence is also strongly felt in organisational culture with people across the business experiencing personal and family welfare benefits. Holden concluded: “If you get your people and culture right and focus on customers, good things follow.” ■





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Fostering more female ta

A high profile campaigner for women in comms is Colt CEO Keri Gilder who is at the vanguard of breakthrough industry and company initiatives. Here, she shares insights into her current priorities and strategies to measure and drive sector-wide diversity and inclusion.



Keri Gilder

Female representation in the male dominated comms sector has been the subject of discussion for some time, with a particular focus on the low number of women in leadership positions. Yet businesses with higher levels of diversity at executive level are 25 per cent more likely to outperform others, according to McKinsey.

“Diverse businesses are more innovative, drive faster decision making, generate better engagement and retain and attract talent,” stated Gilder. “But gender disparity remains a huge issue across the industry. Unless we address this issue, as a sector our progress and growth will be limited.”

Gilder cited a study that found just 14 per cent of telecoms firms have majority female ownership. “Businesses must make it easier for women to succeed in senior roles,” she added. “Not just in terms of recruitment, but also providing support for

women who face barriers in successfully carrying out these roles. For example, women over 50 are the fastest growing demographic in the workplace. At the same time, more than one in ten women have left their job due to unmanageable menopause symptoms. The topic is still taboo in far too many boardrooms and if we don’t do something about it we risk women being sidelined or unable to apply for top jobs.”

With 44 per cent of women saying their ability to work has been impacted by the menopause Colt set about raising awareness through internal events and initiatives, from sharing experiences to inviting guest speakers and making available various resources.

“Just showing we’re there, we’re listening and we’re talking about this is important for women to feel supported and able to apply for senior roles,” commented Gilder. “I’m passionate about this, and I’m fortunate to be

As a pioneer of the digital age it’s our duty to address the next big challenge – to make sure our people reflect the diversity of the markets we serve

in a position to drive lasting, meaningful change.”

Scoring high in diversity

In her role as Chair of TM Forum’s Diversity and Inclusion Council, Gilder led the creation of an Inclusion and Diversity Score (IDS). To develop the IDS, TM Forum tracked insight

from more than 11,000 professionals and 180,000 data points to establish a score which will measure inclusion across an entire organisation and for different groups of employees.

Companies taking part are provided insights on factors impacting a sense of

inclusion as well as research-based insights on how to drive improvements.

“It provides a transparent way for the comms sector to measure its inclusion and diversity performance, transparency and accountability, and sets a benchmark for change,” said

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alent at the top

Gilder. "The industry can adopt the IDS and we can set a baseline which is essential to closing the knowledge-to-action gap around inclusion and diversity."

Gilder is also President of the Global Telecom Women's Network (GTWN) which offers a forum for women active across the industry. It aims to provide role models for younger women in telecoms and to evolve the global information society in a positive way. "As a pioneer of the digital age it's our duty to address the next big challenge – to make

We need to ensure that, as an industry, we're attracting and keeping women in fulfilling roles

sure our people reflect the diversity of the markets we serve," added Gilder.

To that end Colt operates a flexible company culture and is committed to empowering and equipping women with the skills and support they need to thrive. "We set targets and hold ourselves accountable," noted Gilder. "We invest in training and education, and we role model inclusive behaviours and values which drive psychological safety – the right to be yourself at work without fear of consequence. These factors, combined with our commitment to internal mobility, are helping us make inroads in addressing gender disparity and increasing female representation in senior roles.

"We still have a way to go, but we are improving with initiatives such as communities and support networks, education and training, working to raise awareness of how bias can impact decision making, with mandatory Conscious Inclusion training for all employees – along with policy improvements to promote new ways of working that support an inclusive environment."

Mentoring is key

Working with a coach or mentor especially can help build confidence and encourage women in less senior positions to speak up, believes Gilder. "Identifying skills gaps and taking ownership of training and education to fill these gaps will be helpful," she added. "Asking for 360 degree feedback across all levels of a business can also be beneficial. And surrounding women with a strong support network is crucial, whether this is family, friends, colleagues or peers.

"We also need to ensure that, as an industry, we're attracting and keeping women in fulfilling roles. Younger people entering the workplace are more socially and politically aware than previous generations, guided by a strong moral compass and sense of what is just and unjust. Values and purpose are not just nice to have, they are deciding factors for candidates seeking employment."

Research by recruitment platform Monster found that 83 per cent of candidates say that a company's commitment to diversity

and inclusion is important when they're choosing an employer. Therefore, noted Gilder, businesses must be transparent, open and authentic. "Participation in the Inclusion and Diversity Score drives transparency, holds businesses accountable and offers candidates and employees a window into a company's values and culture," she added.

Research also found that the number of women accepted onto full-time STEM undergraduate courses in the UK increased by more than 50 per cent. "As an industry we have a responsibility to progress the career paths of these undergraduates, to nurture and retain them. Doing so will benefit our businesses, our industry and our economic growth," commented Gilder.

As for the comms sector as a whole, progress has been made but there is still a long way to go. At the same time, the digital skills gap is widening. "It is estimated that the industry will need to fill three million digital roles by 2025," said Gilder. "There is a fantastic opportunity for women to fill these roles and we must begin at grass roots level, encouraging, empowering and incentivising girls to participate in courses and subjects required by our industry. STEM subjects, for example.

"Of all industries, ours has had the greatest influence on the digital transformation we're experiencing across society. Without the industry's digital capabilities and technical expertise, the pace of change would progress at a steady rate, rather than the breakneck speed we have facilitated." ■

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Strategies to diversify top

If the quest to source and build talent for top jobs is to be truly successful it must be viewed through a diversity and inclusion lens, according to CityFibre Director of Compliance (and sponsor of the Gender Network) Sarah Parsons, and Jenny Bumford, Associate Director – HR Service Delivery.

To its great credit CityFibre has increased female representation within its executive leadership team to more than 27 per cent over the last five years, and this year the company doubled its female representation within senior management with some key hires. This is also reflected across the business as a whole, with targets and strategies in place to ensure gender balance. Like all types of diversification, having a strong female presence within boardrooms brings varied points of views and perspectives – a diversity of thinking with different experiences, backgrounds, competencies, knowledge and different objectives and goals.

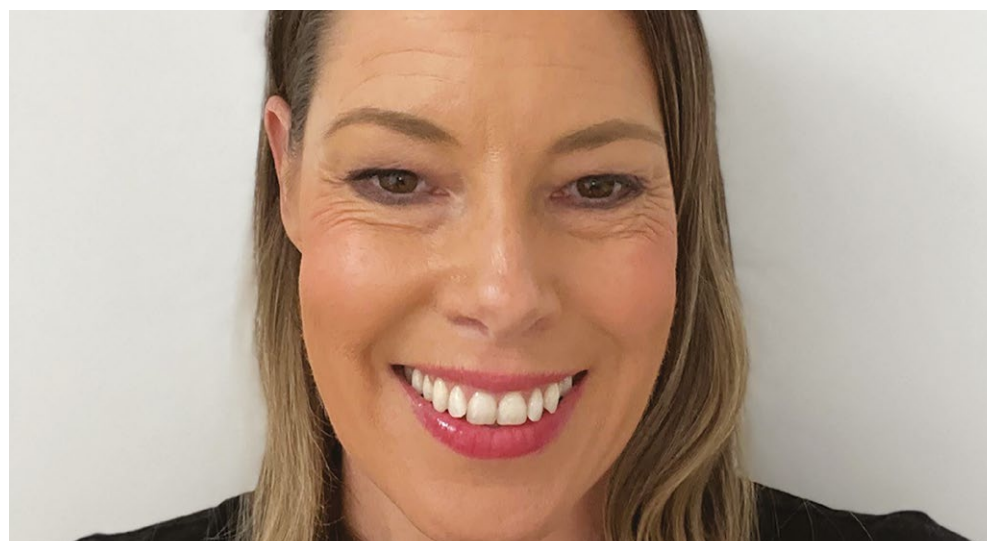
Research suggests that for a group to have an impact on decision making it needs to form 30 per cent of the whole. "This ratio may not always be a critical consideration for business

leaders, but it should be top of mind in organisations that are focused on creating a diverse and inclusive working environment," said Parsons. "Our board split is approximately 27 per cent female so we are not far off this target and we have various strategies in place to ensure our appeal to female candidates. Across the wider organisation our gender split is around 26 per cent."

According to Bumford, CityFibre has a pipeline of capable and knowledgeable women who could 'easily' fill future board and senior leadership positions. "Part of our ongoing succession planning policy is to identify potential applicants internally as well as our external recruitment strategies," she explained. "Within CityFibre, opportunities for professional development and career progression are bountiful and encouraged at all levels across the organisation regardless of gender or any other diversifying factors."



Sarah Parsons



Jenny Bumford

The industry needs to see that diverse thought leadership leads to thriving business and sparks innovation

All of this makes for a broader spectrum of discussions, ideas and more creativity and innovation, pointed out Bumford. "The diversity ratios of our senior management are reflective of our teams in general, which shows a good mix of perspectives," she added. "And when supported with a culture that encourages people to

speak up and be heard, this breeds innovation and creativity and makes for a more productive and forward thinking organisation.

"We also have flexible and hybrid working policies and family friendly initiatives to encourage female candidates and ensure a good work life balance for all employees. Our CEO Greg Mesch

regularly repeats his mantra across the organisation of 'look after yourselves and your families first', and CityFibre will prosper from more relaxed, balanced and productive employees."

According to Parsons, CityFibre's mission is to build a legacy, and recent recognition and award wins support this ambition. For

level leadership

the second year in a row CityFibre was named in the Times Top 50 Employer for Women; it scooped the Vendor/Distributor People and Culture team award at the Channel Champion Awards in the summer; and last year picked up the Comms National Award for Diversity.

"Our mission means being tireless in our pursuit to break new ground, replacing the complacency of incumbent thinking with the determination of a challenger," she said. "Diversity, equity and inclusion is key to our

The diversity ratios of our senior management are reflective of our teams in general, which shows a good mix of perspectives

success. With all diversity, it's important to ensure all cultural requirements and potential differences are considered."

In 2020, CityFibre joined the FTTH Council Women in Fibre Committee. "It's through the committee that we can share learning across European fibre builders and operators, collectively innovating to shift the dial on diversity within the industry," added Parsons. "Our Responsible Business programme also drives the diversity agenda across the towns and cities in which we build, often involved in outreach programmes

focused on girls in STEM, mentorship and inclusion."

More broadly, CityFibre advocates for parity when it comes to external representation. And Parsons says it's crucial to be a high profile role model by ensuring the business has diverse representation at conferences and external events. "The industry needs to see that diverse thought leadership leads to thriving business and sparks innovation," stated Parsons. "It's also important for future generations to have key female role models to provide that inspiration and demonstrate that possibility."

In terms of obstacles to having more women on boards, Bumford says there is an 'obvious numerical barrier' with only so many seats available on the board at any one time. "But it's important that we have a diverse talent pool of available candidates to fill any vacancies as and when they arise," she added. "There is also a general issue across the industry with recruiting experienced and talented employees. This is something we are addressing directly through our new academies."

CityFibre currently operates a Planner Academy and a Field Engineer Academy to recruit and train its own candidates, who come from a range of backgrounds and experiences. "This enables us to develop and build our own talent pool from the ground up rather than rely on more traditional recruitment practices alone," added Bumford. "It's proved successful with 15 already qualified and employed

and more cohorts currently undergoing their training.

"We also focus our recruitment strategy on return to work candidates, supporting females that may be returning to the office after having children or taking a career break. We provide full training and support to get them back into the workplace."

Steering group

CityFibre has also set up a diversity and inclusion steering group with key networks headed up by senior managers, and made up of individuals from across every area of the organisation. These cover gender, disability and carers, LGBTQ+ and cultural inclusion. "The networks provide education and fun events, support employees and develop and implement key policies and procedures," noted Parsons.

"For example, most recently in terms of the Gender Network, we have worked to de-stigmatise the key female issue of the menopause by signing the Menopause Workplace Pledge by Wellbeing of Women."

Parsons believes that recent years have seen an 'awakening' to the issues faced by many women and the upsides that diversity and inclusion brings to the industry. "The benefits are clear to see, and I'm pleased to have witnessed a cultural shift when it comes to inclusion across the sector," she commented. "There is always more to do, so focus on inclusion, be brave in resourcing strategies and challenge, challenge, challenge to create more diversity." ■

"Wishing doesn't make it so"

Reading reports from the UK's National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) on a service launched in 2020. The service is for UK consumers to report suspicious emails especially "phishing" emails; a subject close to our hearts and bank balances here at StayPrivate.

In its 1st year of operation 6.5 million emails were raised as suspicious, 1,000,000 fake URLs taken down and >50,000 scam websites removed. The bulk of the workload is automated, but the process takes time & money. NCSC is one of the only serious agencies in the UK in the public domain which IMHO is delivering real value & effective results (outside of the MOD or related agencies). In telecoms we are used to big numbers, but our regulator Ofcom seems only to like big companies. Can you imagine the form-filling, the committees involved in and the delay in Ofcom trying to monitor &

dynamically manage active security at the domain or network level...errrr, nope me neither!

After a tumultuous 2022 when even our shortest serving Prime Minister's phone was hacked (whatever for! How To Make Effective Presentations or Economics for Dummies?), it remains the case that most corporate networks which are hacked are breached by a phishing email sent from a personal email account.

Resellers, MSP's, dealers & agents selling and supporting cyber in a straightforward old school proven process (problem, solution, sold), see revenues rise, profits flow and secure their customers networks.

And finally, a big thank you to our resellers, distributors and support teams for helping us grow StayPrivate and launch into the channel in 2022. Our best wishes for an enjoyable Christmas and prosperous New Year.



Adrian Barnard

In its 1st year of operation **6.5** million emails were raised as suspicious, **1,000,000** fake URLs taken down and **>50,000** scam websites removed

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Partner calls are heard

BT Wholesale has matured into a major channel force by following one simple principle – listening to partners and acting on their advice.

A headline example of BT Wholesale's capacity to listen and act, and announced at its Partner Plus Live event last month, was the introduction of EE connectivity on a wholesale basis which will be available in the new year. "Mobile is now an essential component of any voice sale," said Propositions Manager Garry Mistry. "Our partners have spoken to us, we have listened, and we have designed a proposition to suit their business. That means we are giving them freedom to add their value to small business customers, their value in terms of the contractual terms that they choose to sign and their value in terms of the overall proposition. It means our partners can lead with their brands in their marketplace, but they will have specific rights to reference the EE brand."

Mistry said the thinking behind the launch was the channel market opportunity identified. "We estimate that approximately 23 per cent of all mobile sales to small business in the UK are made via indirect channels," he added. "That's £750 million worth of annualised revenues. Businesses like

Uber, Netflix, Instagram, YouTube and Amazon would not have evolved the way they have without the launch of widespread 4G. EE has pledged to make 5G available to 90 per cent of the UK landmass by 2028 and it will be fascinating to see what our partners do with this opportunity."

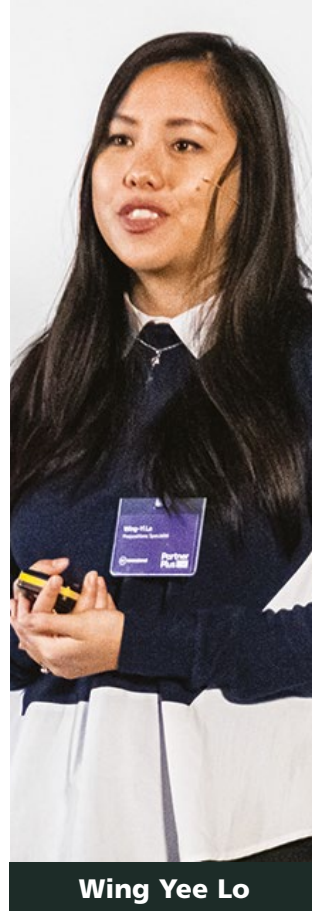
Mistry urged partners to act now rather than wait until the new year roll out. "We're solution ready and entering into trials, but my advice to our partners would be to start speaking to their account managers over the coming days and weeks and to start to landscape with them what mobile means to their business today."

Preparing for stop sell

Also announced was BT Wholesale's Complete Switch ISDN migration proposition which it hopes will enable resellers to ease the path to full IP, which thousands



Garry Mistry



Wing Yee Lo

Our partners have spoken to us, we have listened, and we have designed a proposition to suit their business

of small business customers have yet to tread with just 10 months to go to Openreach's WLR stop sell deadline next September. The initiative, dubbed '123 to All IP' bundles up the three elements the company has identified as log jams in the switchover process,

namely on boarding and number porting, educating and enabling customers and marketing support.

BT Wholesale has amalgamated its layer three Broadband One offer and its WHC Express digital voice service into a joined up single

order journey, underpinned by a suite of professional services. It claims this has reduced the time it takes to place an order from 13 minutes to five minutes. On number porting, the company says it has reduced customer fallout from 36 per cent to an average of 10 per cent and expects to reduce that further in time.

Removing complexity

Proposition Specialist Wing Yee Lo said the programme has been designed to simplify the messaging to customers and navigate the complexities around migration. "Step one is for partners to on board to the hub and take advantage of the Complete Switch products which will enable them to hit the ground running," she said. "Step two is to educate and enable, which is exclusive to our partners and is arguably the most valuable step in this process. It's a tailored, personalised learning journey that's dependent on your role in the business.

"We've curated three separate streams, technical, business and leadership so that you can consume the information that's right for you," she told partners at the event. "And in terms of the elements, we've got small technical elements, such as hub demos, and number porting deep dives, down to more software elements to help you build your 'why switch now' stories. Step three is marketing support. We now have an integrated all-IP campaign in a box that has all the assets you need to build an all-IP marketing plan," she added. ■

How BT creates new innovations for the channel – page 46

Viewpoint: A progressive and maturing channel model...

COMING of age is a well-worn phrase but it certainly applies to BT Wholesale. Originally founded in 2009 the company has gone through several transitions, latterly coming under the umbrella of BT Enterprise in 2018. Current Managing Director Alex Tempest joined from channel centric TalkTalk Business in 2017, and she and her team must take great credit for transforming BT Wholesale into a connectivity partner an increasing number of channel players now want to do business with. This was underlined late last month when Daisy Communications, one of the largest comms providers in the UK with 200,000 business customers, signed an enhanced partnership deal with the network provider hot on the heels of the Partner Plus Live event.



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Fostering innovations

Alexandra Foster, Sales Director of BT's innovations unit, is a passionate advocate for new technology and firmly believes resellers have a unique opportunity to differentiate themselves in a crowded market by offering state-of-the-art digital innovations now.

We meet Foster over tea on the 35th floor of The Shard in London, while on the floor below us the expo section of BT Wholesale's latest Partner Plus Live event is in full swing, and the innovation stand is attracting much attention. The division was created eight months ago with a £100 million investment fund and 300 staff to scale up and commercialise the development of 'unique' customer solutions incorporating components such as 5G Private Networks, IoT, Immersive Spaces and Edge Computing, amongst others.

Outlining the *raison d'être* of the new division Foster extols the value of problem solving which lies at the core of most reseller objectives. "As an organisation we're moving from being a telco to a techno," she stated. "Innovation is all about creating new solutions and new propositions for the market. We've got a huge amount of R&D in Adastral

Park (BT's research centre) where our digital teams scour the world for innovations. It's about bringing the best of what partners have got to create solutions that solve customer problems today – problems they perhaps don't even know they've got."

Having earlier outlined BT's key innovation objectives on stage alongside Indirect Sales Manager Jon Cooper, Foster praised delegates for their enthusiasm and willingness to embrace new ideas. "My key takeaway from today was the passion of the partners... their passion for the channel and their passion for wanting to do the right things for the organisations they support," added Foster. "Their hunger and excitement for new things they can talk to customers about is inspiring."

One of the stand-out innovations on display was Digital Vision, a joint BT/Atos project that combines BT's digital connectivity with Atos's Computer Vision Platform which allows end users to interpret information from digital images, videos



Alexandra Foster

BT's innovations unit is all about creating new solutions and new propositions

and other visual feeds (including live video streams from a fixed camera or a moving drone) and take automated actions or make recommendations based on the data compiled. Foster believes such technology could be a vital tool for manufacturing, logistics and retail industries.

"I was speaking to one partner and he said, 'we're going to focus on verticals now and this will be brilliant for hospitality or retail'," explained Foster. "The feeling is growing that we're developing a strong partnership of trust. We're taking customers on a journey with our 123 steps

to all IP, but it's clear they want more and that's where innovation comes in."

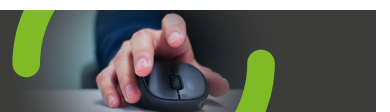
Purple glow

Foster is under no illusion that some resellers may require help to impose complex technologies like IoT and Digital Vision into the minds of customers but believes they should recall the Ready Brek 'Central Heating for Kids' advert that was introduced to the public back in the seventies. "You need somebody to help you take a leap of faith sometimes," she said. "We want resellers and channel partners to feel like they've got a purple glow around them when they're taking that leap because it's

not a leap into the unknown. "They've got that protection because our team will help them understand the opportunity they've got with customers. They can learn, they can earn and hopefully they might even have a bit of fun at the same time."

The growth of private 5G, which can replace multiple Wi-Fi points on a large premises, and IoT connectivity via data Sims, will remain at the forefront of BT Wholesale's channel proposition, but when pressed to name the most compelling solution for resellers Foster returns to the opportunities presented in retail and hospitality by Digital Vision. "This means organisations can use their current infrastructure around cameras, even if they've got end of life or old CCTV units," she observed. "You can almost superpower them with AI and get compelling insights. It's simply about extending what a customer estate can do. And as an ancillary to that sell we're seeing a 5G pull through with organisations involved in entertainment or education where 3D immersive spaces can create very different learning environments."

BT has been harshly labelled in the past as Boring Telecom which, unsurprisingly, riles Foster. "I've never felt that about BT," she stated. "In all the areas I've worked in at BT it always felt like it's been on the front foot, such as some of the things we've done in financial markets around blockchain to what we're doing today in terms of IoT and Digital Vision, taking digital images to create insight. I think the B and the T stands for Bright Talent and Brilliant Technology." ■



New headquarters, further acquisitions and not standing still

With new headquarters and a couple of acquisitions under its belt, unified communications provider, Firstcom Europe has had a busy October. The harsh economic headwinds that are being predicted for the next few years have not blown Firstcom Europe off course. It's sticking to its plans.

Christian Bleakley, CEO of Firstcom Europe remains restless and ambitious for his company's future. Over the past nine years Firstcom has made ten acquisitions and increased its annual turnover from £2.7m to over £36m. It is headquartered in Bolton and currently operates in the UK, Germany, Sweden and Denmark. Firstcom is an expert in unified communications where customers can use messaging, voice calls, video or fax on the device they choose.

Firstcom has just acquired Calteq Ltd, located in Hertfordshire and Suffolk. The deal adds an extra £6.2m of turnover and £1.2m of EBITDA to the Firstcom group and expands both its UK geographical reach and range of products. On top of this it has bought Raspberry Beret and a couple of customer databases and has more acquisitions in the pipeline.

Starting his telecoms career in Bolton in 1993, Christian worked his way up the ranks eventually starting his

own telecoms company in 2009. Many of Firstcom's original customers are still with the company and some partners and suppliers have been working with it for the 13 years.

Its new headquarters is a vital step forward in Firstcom Europe's development. The benefits of remote and hybrid working are well-known, but for Firstcom, office based work is crucial when it comes to building teams, mentoring and training. "Creating an



"Creating an environment where your colleagues want to learn, work hard and move forward in their careers is essential for company success. This ultimately affects everything a business does, including its growth trajectory"

Christian Bleakley



environment where your colleagues want to learn, work hard and move forward in their careers is essential for company success. This ultimately affects everything a business does, including its growth trajectory", commented Bleakley. The new headquarters in Bolton has large amounts of natural light, is heavily branded in the company colours and allows easy collaboration between colleagues from different parts of the organisation.

But complacency is not on the Firstcom agenda. According to Bleakley, "Technology that was just being introduced when I joined the industry, such as ISDN, will be ripped out by 2025, and new IP cloud technologies will replace it. Very few people had heard of video conferencing three years ago, now everyone demands it. Broadband is now considered to be as important a service as water or energy. To be part of an industry like telecoms, you simply cannot stand still."

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Resellers outsourcing to se

The build-up to 2025 is the perfect time for MSPs to capture more business by adding additional capabilities. UK businesses will be presented with a myriad of new tech/comms options and will default to their trusted reseller partner when considering making these investments.

Whilst MSPs run the risk of losing business when these requests cannot be fulfilled, it is often hard to add new services and ensure competency and credibility simultaneously.

Some MSPs are using outsourcing and collaborative partnerships with suppliers to navigate this challenge, achieve a competitive advantage and build more value.

With this in mind, we asked our contributors how collaborative partnering between ICT suppliers and end user organisations can catalyse the outsourcing agenda and drive demand for the MSP model?



JOHN DOWBIGGIN
X.COMM

"The move to All-IP is the biggest opportunity the comms market has seen for a long time and the demand for the MSP model is going to grow exponentially, as end users seek to consolidate their supply chain and streamline their collaborative partnerships. Historically, new services from disparate suppliers were bolted on to existing old school comms, creating unwieldy and difficult to manage in-house solutions. This is eliminated by moving to cloud-based hybrid infrastructure solutions delivered by MSPs. High collaborating MSPs are much more likely to be trusted to install, implement, manage and keep secure an organisation's IT functioning, mission-critical systems and hosted telephony. An MSP that is reliable and delivers services consistently is worth its weight in gold. MSPs need to differentiate themselves from others by offering something they can't. It's essential to create value by adding vertical-specific integrations and innovate through vendors API's."



JULIE BISHOP
IT NATURALLY

"There is huge opportunity for the technology providers to create real partnerships with MSPs which would benefit the whole industry. We currently don't see much collaboration; we are resellers rather than partners. Microsoft made huge changes to their licensing recently with limited guidance. IBM is trying to be more connected to the channel but there's a long way to go. The model in comms would be a great one for MSPs to follow. If one of the big players changed their framework and led the way, it would make positive changes. The more you collaborate the better for MSPs as we would be able to provide more knowledge for our customers and therefore bring more return for the suppliers. All MSPs have their superpower; for some it is verticals, for others it's something else. We focus on quality and ethics. The channel could categorise us in this way."



DARREN GARLAND
PROVU

"Collaborative partnering is essential for MSPs to capture the most business. It's unrealistic to expect an MSP to offer everything, so outsourcing can often be the best way to capitalise on the breadth of opportunities available. MSPs will often come across a niche product or service requirement. Whilst it may not always be cost-effective or worth the investment for them to offer the product/service themselves, it could be a dealbreaker. Utilising the resources available from your supplier is the best way to bridge the gap and secure a larger slice of the pie. The key thing for MSPs to secure in the run up to 2025 is a supplier they can trust and work with to maximise their opportunities. Think of them as an extension of your business, someone who you can call upon when those niche requests arise. This will help to ensure a seamless customer experience."



DAN DAVIES
MAINTEL

"We continue to see organisations seeking to consolidate the ICT services they procure through as small a number of strategic partners as possible. Therefore, it stands to reason that the more diverse an MSPs offering is, the greater the opportunity they have. However, there's a catch. Customers still expect high levels of competence and credibility. The challenge faced by MSPs is how to expand their offering without diluting their capability. Partnering is a great way to avoid this, particularly in areas that aren't natural adjacencies to their current offering, where they don't have strong references, or where an internal resource investment wouldn't stack up until the new line of business reaches a critical mass. Most critically, MSPs must make sure that they still add value in this partnering model and create differentiation through innovations such as portals, automation and integration, to ensure success."



OLIVER BAREHAM
FOURNET

"Managed service providers can use collaborative partnerships with other third-party suppliers to achieve a competitive advantage and build more value for their customers. By partnering with suppliers, MSPs like FourNet can tap into new markets, technologies, and capabilities. This allows us to offer innovative services to customers and differentiate ourselves from the competition. Contact centres are a good example of how MSPs can use these partnerships to build more value. By working closely with their contact centre customers embarking on a digital transformation programme, MSPs can bring not only their core competencies, but new, innovative solutions. This allows them to provide a better overall customer experience and improve their bottom line. So, if you're an MSP looking to build more value, consider outsourcing your customer experience transformation programme. It's a great way to differentiate yourself from the competition and offer innovative services to your customers."



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BERNIE MCPHILLIPS
PANGEA

“With their customers’ tenders rapidly expanding, MSPs have shown an increasing willingness to collaborate over recent years, and their typical clients include ICT subscription-based services. Early adopting, high collaborating MSPs are gaining an advantage today and there’ll soon come a point when not playing in this space will be a significant disadvantage. We’re seeing a big emphasis put on IoT, as everyone is looking to drive efficiencies, make savings, and future-proof their investments, with public sector frameworks operating on a point scoring basis. At Pangea we have partnerships with many of the UK’s largest MSPs and have together won many multi-million-pound contracts. Best of all, this wave of change brings opportunities for the channel. Exciting times ahead!”



ALAN RIDDOCH
AGILITY COMMS

“While we’re experts in our respective fields, our customers perceive us as experts in all things ‘tech’. Therefore, the right partnerships help us surpass those presumptions and become the trusted tech adviser customers expect. The first step is finding partners in specialist areas that your customers see a genuine benefit in – security, mailing, merchant services – whatever it may be. This enables resellers to become more than simply ‘voice and data’ providers, and step away from the race to supply at the lowest cost. Resellers primarily stand to gain long-term loyalty, as well as far easier sales conversations with less pushback through the upsell journey, thanks to the trust that is built over time. However, resellers need to prove the credibility they’ve established and honesty they embody first, which is where the right partner can ensure accurate and prompt responses to more technical questions, which helps build that perception.”



SOHINI RAITHATHA
REDSQUID

“With the current macroeconomics, we’ve seen PLC organisations realise that in-house IT helpdesk engineers are expensive, and now we are seeing a trend where businesses are stripping out their IT teams to cut costs. MSP’s such as RedSquid provide a cost-saving alternative to an in-house IT team, while we also offer the opportunity to take organisations through the digital transformation and deliver essential and personalised cyber security solutions. In the lead up to 2025, differentiation is essential to supercharge growth. Your purpose, core values, and sustainability are all factors that drive individuality and enable customers to decide who they want to take them safely through the security landscape and digital transformation. As the whole industry is now working to move customers from legacy systems onto modern and future proof technology, your brand and personality is what allows you to stand out from the crowd and work towards growth.”



MARK PILLOW
VOIP UNLIMITED

“When MSPs knit-together solutions from multiple providers into a single all-encompassing solution, they enhance the value they provide for end-users. The ‘one supplier’ customer experience is far simpler and more streamlined, making every aspect from billing to support much easier, in turn increasing customer satisfaction. From the reseller’s point of view, customers take more products, increasing their ‘stickiness’, for longer relationships which produce greater, more predictable revenue. While leveraging these new vendor relationships to open up new customer and market opportunities, channel operations should also focus on finding efficiencies to help current customers through these turbulent times. By acting more as consultants than resellers, MSPs can position themselves as experts, building their credibility and knowledge base, leaning on their vendors for support in new technologies and deployments and establishing themselves as their customers’ first port of call for digital transformation initiatives.”



ANDREW DICKINSON
JOLA

“Acquisitions done properly are a great way to efficiently grow EBITDA but even with the best integration plans, organic growth and product innovation are likely to stall. MSPs have to focus on standardisation of resource and IT systems and they need suppliers that recognise this and go the extra mile to help them grow regardless. Jola’s best partners in this category take advantage of our ability to innovate and differentiate by outsourcing things like billing, support and fulfilment. This enables them to quickly cross-sell high margin MRR products into their ever-growing base of customers. Our portals and APIs allow them to integrate new products with minimal development resource and our productised MRG on-ramp process makes sure they are targeting their best prospects. We help them identify and fill the gaps in their capability to sell mobile data, and we are laser-focussed on ensuring they win their first deal.”



DAVID WARDELL
EVOKE

“2025 and industry lockdown lessons continue to push traditional comms further into the IT space. With this new complexity, some resellers have turned to the ‘agent’ model and taken a more single solution, ‘hands off’ approach to this new market. However, as products continue to commoditise, many MSP’s see opportunity borne out of providing more rather than less. This is being mirrored along the supply chain with ISPs and IT service providers making more products available to the channel, via alliances. This is powering broader offerings, all neatly wrapped in an added value (and added margin) service pack. Increasingly customers are seeing the value in this and are outsourcing many key IT services to single strategic partners. Growing volumes and wider revenue-earning portfolios are benefitting all and providing the potential for significant uplift in contract sizes. For those with the vision 2025 is a definite opportunity to supercharge growth.”

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ANS brings in CPO



Toria McCahill

ANS Group has appointed Toria McCahill as its first Chief People Officer (CPO). She joins from Comparison Technologies, another tech business in the Inflexion Private Equity portfolio. McCahill is also a founder member of the Reward Employee Benefits Association, a professional network for the reward and employee benefits community.

She said: "My passion is to build diverse and high-performing teams, enabling people to develop and grow their careers. When it comes to our people initiatives and incentives, we're not here to do BAU. We're here to add massive value."

McCahill has a background in finance and M&A but made the switch to HR more than a decade ago and has held

senior roles at Samsung, Dentsu and Dixons Carphone Warehouse. ANS CEO Richard Thompson added: "Toria has a deep understanding of commercial strategy and how it links to people strategy. We are investing to make sure our team have all the tools to deliver on our ambitious plans, and that we attract, retain and engage amazing people."

Also on the move...

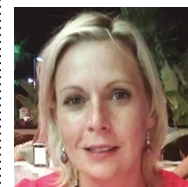
FORMER Air IT and Solar Communications CEO John Whitty is set to drive Gradwell Communications' next growth phase as incoming Chairman, succeeding Mark Howling. Whitty's primary focus will be on developing Gradwell's channel offering and footprint, building on the launch of the firm's Alliance Programme in January this year. CEO Jamie Ward said: "The channel programme is a key strategic initiative for the long-term growth of the business and will benefit from John's experience." Whitty added: "The business is now ready to take advantage of the recent investments in systems, people and sales capability."



John Whitty

THE appointment of Jon Chard as Partner Director at Jola marks a significant strengthening of its channel presence. CSO Lee Broxson stated: "Jon brings 17 years of telecoms experience with five of those spent working with Jola at one of our suppliers. He will be managing our larger MSP and ISP partners."

8X8 has appointed Claire Snow as Regional Vice President EMEA, Channel Sales. She previously completed a 16-plus year stint at Avaya and was Go



Claire Snow

to Market Leader UK&I before moving to 8x8. "There's still so

much we can do with our channel," stated Snow. "Building solid relationships plays to my strengths. Our job is to find the balance between helping partners showcase the value of the proposition while maintaining a model and business offering that is not so bespoke it cannot scale."

MANCHESTER-based IT cloud and managed services provider BCN Group has pulled in Mark Braund as Non-Executive Chairman to provide strategic support over the coming four to five years. The move builds on BCN's acquisition of Microsoft



Mark Braund

Dynamics 365 Business Central specialist Evo-soft. Prior to setting up his own advisory practice Braund was CEO of RedstoneConnect. He is also Chair of Livingstone Group, NFS Technology Group, Parity Group and React Group. "Tech services is an industry which so many businesses rely on, and the sector will only grow with technological

advances," stated Braund. "As the company enters its next phase of growth I am looking forward to seeing what's in store for BCN in the coming years."

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