



**BT Wholesale
post-merger plan
clarified p12**

**Horton on his 'big
hairy audacious
goal' p22**



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- 3-6**
Industry News
Catch up with the latest news

- 8**
Interview
ANS chief eyes channel growth

- 36**
Business Profile
Simwood CEO returns with intent

- 38**
Insight Session
Striking the right full fibre balance

- 40**
Women on Boards
D&I leader makes a continuing impact

- 42**
Comms People
This month's movers and shakers



Ofcom executes Equinox 2 delay

OPENREACH'S Equinox 2 FTTP discount offer due to launch 1st April has been set back two months by Ofcom following concerns raised by certain altnets that the commercial terms may undermine new network build.

SPECIAL REPORT

The regulator's Equinox 2 consultation closed on 4th March ahead of a planned final decision by the end of last month.

In a statement Ofcom said, 'We have received a number of detailed and extensive responses to the consultation, some of which raise issues that require further assessment.'

'We anticipate that it will take an additional two months to undertake this further work and issue our final decision. We remain fully committed to our strategy of network competition and ensuring a level playing field for all fibre investors as that competition plays out.'

CityFibre CEO Greg Mesch (pictured) commented: 'Ofcom appears to be taking the industry's concerns seriously.'

'Taking more time to properly consider the impact of Equinox 2 is the right approach if UK consumers and businesses are to benefit from a healthy competitive market for the long term.'

Mark Shurmer, MD for Regulation at Openreach, added: 'It's important the regulator has time to consider all the feedback it has received fully and fairly.'

'That said, we don't think customers should be forced to pay higher prices because of this delay. So, if Ofcom's initial assessment is confirmed in May we'll ensure our customers benefit from Equinox 2 pricing from 1st April.'

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EDITOR'S COMMENT



Stuart Gilroy

Driving change, and feeling at home with transformation:

I moved house nearly two years ago – downsized somewhat to a place that was previously rented. Having been rented out, virtually the whole house is coated (inside) with marigold paint, the landlord standard.

I've not had time to redecorate but it is (and has been since the day I collected the keys) on the to-do list.

Meantime, the strategy has been to introduce other colours into rooms – paintings, furniture, rugs, curtains – that distract from marigold and also avert eyes from areas of striking artex textured finishes. But adopting this tactic leads me to believe that I may not get around to redecorating without an almighty electric shock sparking me into action. First and foremost, there's always something better to do, and I could live with the status quo because, after all, there is a handy school of thought that says a home is somewhere just to lay your head.

Who am I kidding? I've spent hundreds of hours writing about the importance of moving with the times, refreshing the strategic palette and brushing up on future planning. Sitting on hands and relegating much needed strategic actions to a to-do list just because you're ticking along OK and you can live with it is not an option.

And there's no time like the present: A business, like a house, shown in its best light increases in value, is a nicer place to be and far more competitive should it come to market – all achieved through the application of proactivity.

So don't wait for a lightning bolt to electrify you. Look around at what needs to change, remove all distractions from what's required of your business at this time of industry transformation, see beyond the status quo, don't procrastinate, put a fresh coat of paint on your strategy, create curb appeal and feel more at home and more competitive in the evolving marketplace and beyond. It's time to decide on a colour.

Stuart Gilroy, Editor

Tang energised by CEO job resumption

ZEN founder and Chairman Richard Tang is to reprise his role as CEO following the retirement of Paul Stobart late last month.

Stobart was appointed chief exec five years ago and his achievements include establishing Zen as a Net Zero ambassador and environmental champion across the comms channel and beyond.

"Zen has become a B Corp and cemented its credentials as an eco-friendly business," said Stobart. "We have deployed solar, agreed our Net Zero plan with the Science Based Targets initiative (SBTi) and we're becoming an acknowledged voice in our industry in the environmental space."

Stobart also oversaw revenue growth of 70% (annualised revenues sit at £110m) and an increase in the size of Zen's broadband base from 128,000 to 190,000 circuits.

"We were one of the first providers to sign up to Ofcom's voluntary auto compensation scheme and are also compliant with the regulator's updated voluntary code of practice

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Richard Tang

Although I was CEO for 23 years before Paul took over it still holds all the excitement of starting a new job.

on better broadband speeds," added Stobart.

"We have unbundled a further 300 exchanges to reach our current footprint of 700 and invested substantively in our core network and data centres. I am particularly proud of the investments we have made in our people, including learning and development programmes, D&I, higher quality communications, enhanced benefits, hybrid working and more."

Tang added: "Five years ago I offered Paul my job as CEO. I have said many times that it was one of my best decisions. Now it's time for me to get back in the driving seat – and I can't

wait. Although I was CEO for 23 years before Paul took over, it still holds all the excitement of starting a new job."



Paul Stobart



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NEWS ROUNDUP

IN ITS 2022 full year results CloudCoCo posted a 198% revenue increase to £24.2m (2021: £8.1 million), with 67% of the total generated from recurring contracts (2021: 62%). Gross profit rose to £7.9m (2021: £3.2 million), a margin of 33% (2021: 40%). CEO Mark Halpin said: "Our focus during the year centred around the integration of four acquisitions made in the second half of 2021. We rationalised our cost base and uncovered the potential we saw in these acquisitions. Now a stronger and leaner outfit, we remain focused on driving organic growth alongside strategic M&A opportunities."

SIMON Cornwell has been pulled in by Rydal Group as Sales Director with a particular remit to manage multiple revenue streams and channels and drive the Peterborough-based company's expansion plans. He brings over 20 years experience in sales and management working at start-ups and global corporations and was a co-founder of Charterhouse Voice & Data where, as Sales Director, he is credited with helping to grow the business without acquisitions to a turnover of £18m by the time he left in 2014.

Gamma's revenues on the up

GAMMA'S UK indirect business generated 10% revenue growth to £295.9m (2021: £270.2m) in 2022 while gross profit increased by 9% to £155.6m (2021: £143.2m).

Gamma's results also show that overall revenue and gross profit grew by 8% to £484.6m and £247.7m respectively (2021: £447.7m and £228.5m), with gross margin maintained at 51%. Recurring revenue stayed high at 89% (2021: 89%).

New customer wins boosted the UK direct business driving a 10% revenue hike to £115.5m (2021: £104.8m) with gross profit increasing 9% to £57.4m (2021: £52.6m).

Gamma CEO Andrew Bels-haw said: "We have a high degree of recurring revenue and expect to continue to be strongly cash generative. A healthy balance sheet allows us to continue investing in the business while supporting organic growth with acquisitions."



Andrew Bels-haw

SCC swoops on IT reseller



James Rigby

FAREHAM-based IT reseller Vohkus, which began its commercial life in 2001, has 160 employees and generates £100m turnover, is SCC's first acquisition since it announced a £300m technology investment programme to underpin growth and pursue targets as part of a multi-year expansion strategy.

Vohkus enables SCC to scale its presence and bring products and services to Vohkus clients.

SCC CEO James Rigby commented: "It was apparent from our first conversation that Vohkus shares our entrepreneurial culture. The long tenure of Vohkus's people and the talent within its services business will add value to SCC."

SCC CRO Adam Clark added: "This deal offers a platform for Vohkus to leverage SCC's services capability, providing scale and capability to

support customers' transformation initiatives."

Frank O'Leary, co-founder at Vohkus, noted: "This represents an opportunity to strengthen our product business while expanding our services offerings."

NEWS ROUNDUP

FORMER Deloitte, DWF, Keoghs and Davies Group executive Alex Hodgson has joined Manchester-based ANS Group as Chief Financial Officer. The appointment follows ANS' acquisition of Preact, a 65-strong Microsoft Dynamics 365 CRM Partner and Power Platform Expert. See page 8

RADIUS Connect is making its products and services available to channel partners for the first time. An initial set of multi-product offerings will later be augmented by mobility solutions. Ray Ferris, Group MD, said: "Partners can leverage our scale and introduce new products and services in specific vertical markets." See page 32

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NEWS ROUNDUP

4COM'S acquisition of Shropshire-based Reach Digital Telecoms adds approximately 1,200 clients and pushes the number of acquired customers to over 3,000. The transaction is 4Com's fourth deal in ten months and follows the purchase of Midshire Telecom, Eastern Voice and Data, and the business telecoms customer base of Bluebell Cloud Solutions. 4Com COO Dean Cartledge commented: "The acquisition allows us to expand and strengthen our services, specifically in terms of scale, presence, capability and expertise."

FLOTEK'S geographical reach has extended into north Wales, the midlands and north west England following its acquisition of Chester-based ECS Solutions. The deal increases Swansea headquartered Flotek's turnover to £4.5m and its client base to 850 nationwide. The acquisition is its sixth transaction and follows an investment into south east telecoms company FlexiNet. Flotek CEO Jay Ball commented: "ECS enables us to achieve the key target of providing a set-time response to clients via dedicated teams of local engineers able to access north Wales and England."

Giacom-DWS in Intec deal



Mike Wardell

GIACOM and DWS are to supply Manchester-based Intec Group with cloud and comms services. The deal builds on an existing relationship between Giacom and IT support provider Astec Computing which was acquired by Intec in May 2022.

Giacom CEO and Chief Commercial Officer at DWS Mike Wardell said: "We each have ambitions to grow within the channel and this partnership enables us to do exactly that."

Intec's buy and build strategy means it now has offices in Dublin, Newcastle, Sussex, Altrincham, Guildford and Cumbria. The acquisition of Astec Computing was Intec's twelfth since 2016 and fourth in 2022. Intec now has a team of over 120 people.

Intec MD Phil Astell said: "We needed a partner that can scale with us. Having previously had a successful relationship with Giacom at Astec we are taking that partnership to the next level with DWS."

Giacom provides cloud services to over 3,600 partners and joined forces with DWS in 2020. DWS has over 5,500 partners and demerged from the Daisy Group in March 2021.

In recently posted annual results DWS' revenues grew organically by 12.8% on a pro forma basis to £316.7m, with double digit revenue growth across all key product lines – mobile, connectivity and cloud.

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NFON set for rise in revenues

IN A BUSINESS update NFON has posted preliminary figures indicating an 8.3% increase in recurring revenues to 73.6m euros (2021: 68m euros), with total revenue of 80.8m euros (2021: 75.9m euros).

Overall this represents a 91.1% share of recurring revenues (2021: 89.5%). The number of seats rose by 8%.

"Despite economic uncertainty and a reluctance for companies to invest we increased our revenue in 2022 and the number of extensions installed at customers' premises," said CEO Klaus von Rottkay.

"At the same time, NFON's business model has continued to mature. With a clearly defined product roadmap, a focus on high growth markets and a solid foundation of partners and customers, we intend to continue to grow and achieve positive adjusted EBITDA in 2023."



Klaus von Rottkay

NEWS ROUNDUP

BABBLE'S cloud service provider proposition and Microsoft knowhow (across Office 365, Sentinel and Azure) received a boost following the acquisition of TechQuarters, a designated Microsoft Cloud Champion and Microsoft World Cloud Partner of the Year for SMBs. TechQuarters' recurring revenue sits at 85% with organic growth at over 40%. Babble CEO Matt Parker commented: "This deal accelerates our capabilities for the full range of Microsoft solutions and moves us another step closer to our aim of being the UK's largest cloud service provider." Babble also acquired Bury-based Microsoft partner Stonegate, again boosting its customer support capabilities.

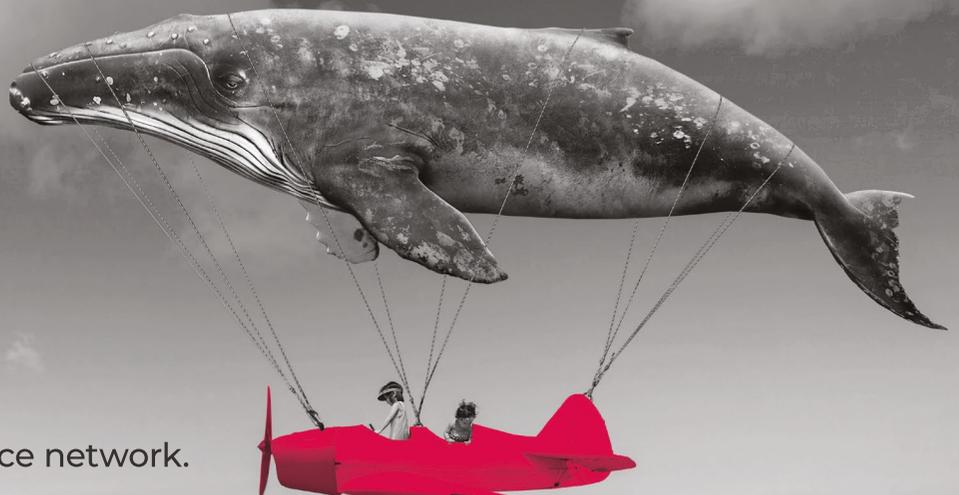
SUPPORT to Win is enabling UCaaS and CCaaS providers to accelerate project completions via its new Technology Integration Development service. CEO Julie Mills commented: "Third party CRMs and other platforms that don't integrate out of the box with a UCaaS and CCaaS product can put deals in jeopardy. This solution will lead to fewer instances where deals are abandoned and revenue lost due to a lack of technical feasibility."



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ANS chief eyes channel

ANS Group CEO Richard Thompson has revealed solid plans for accelerating the firm's channel growth fuelled by an ambitious vision and new propositions that fuse cloud, digital and security strategies designed to boost organisations of all sizes.

ANS Group's channel growth ambitions ramped up last summer with the instatement of former TalkTalk MD-Indirect Richard Thompson as CRO. In October he stepped into the CEO role to build on the company's sale to Inflexion while extending the growth strategy towards new channel partnerships and a broader customer base. At the time of his appointment Thompson said: "I love to be the challenger, disrupting markets and generating growth."

He joined ANS following 20 years with TalkTalk where he helped grow its wholesale broadband market share to more than 60 per cent. It is this experience that Thompson hopes to leverage as ANS embarks on the next phase of its development. With an 800-plus headcount, the business operates at scale across the SMB, enterprise and public sector customer segments and Thompson's remit is to drive significant growth through these existing channels and new

channel partner routes to market. He is also focusing heavily on ANS's people and engagement, while investing in the group's capability for scale.

"We're expanding our channels and investing in talent while maintaining our focus on the customer experience, our strengths in cloud, security and digital, and on unlocking opportunities for our customers with these technologies," stated Thompson. "Technology partners want access to cloud vendors and solutions but don't necessarily have the in-house expertise or resources to do so.

"We're building on 25 years experience of making cloud simple for our partners and their customers and we're committing to investing further because this is an area where we can deliver significant value. We're investing in our systems and capability because it's critical that it's easy to do business with us."



Richard Thompson

Another of Thompson's strategic aims is to build on the integration of recently acquired Microsoft Dynamics 365 CRM Partner and Power Platform Expert Preact. As a Microsoft Gold Partner and five-times winner of Inner Circle status for Microsoft Business Applications, Preact will accelerate a significant part of ANS's strategy to expand its SMB offering.

Right timing

Being a driver of change at the right point of the market and product lifecycle is key, believes Thompson. "We play in high growth markets that are expanding," he commented. "The time is very much now for cloud, digital, and security products."

Thompson emphasised that the channel proposition is built with transparent rules of engagement across the direct and partner business. "How a channel partner

interacts with us depends on their competency in the cloud," explained Thompson. "Our referral scheme caters for any technology businesses wanting to fill product gaps. We have more than 500 referral partners and expect to see an acceleration in numbers. We are also looking to build out our reseller capability, targeting traditional channel partners and giving them access to our cloud, security and digital portfolio."

Indirect Sales Manager Ryan Martin is tasked with driving the channel operation day-to-day. "Our plan is to make technology simple, affordable and quick to deploy, while retaining all the required governance and security," he said. "We fundamentally believe that every business, charity, government body, should be able to realise their ambitions. They should never be held back by the inaccessibility or cost

of digital transformation tech. Our strategy is focused on bringing digital transformation to all."

Thompson also noted that cloud adoption is continuing to expand rapidly, with Gartner predicting that by 2025, 85 per cent of organisations will be cloud-first. "Digital transformation to the cloud is vital for businesses to be competitive," he added.

Gartner also states that by 2025, 95 per cent of digital workloads will be deployed by cloud-native platforms. Furthermore, observed Thompson, it's crucial that organisations understand their areas of vulnerability and know how to protect against threats. "ANS takes security technology, pre-configures and automates it to provide the highest level of threat monitoring and defence to protect organisations at every layer," he stated.

According to Thompson, many within the channel are seeking to make the move from fixed line connectivity and telephony to cloud-based services and are looking for a partner that can help them on that transition pathway. "I'm bringing over 20 years channel experience to deliver a proposition across cloud, digital and security," he commented.

"Digital transformation shouldn't be the domain of big business, every organisation large or small should have the right to transform. We're a fresh challenger in a fast-paced industry, making the right decisions and investments to provide digital transformation for all." ■

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 **BT** WHOLESALE

From snooker to cyber

Have-a-go Bridewell co-CEO Scott Nicholson does not shy away from seizing challenges and opportunities of various kinds, so it's no surprise that the dynamic field of cyber security appealed to his sense of adventure.

Comms Dealer has not produced many paragraphs with more twists and turns than the one you are about to read: As a sporty kid who didn't enjoy school Nicholson pocketed few GCSEs but went on to become a professional snooker player after being Welsh amateur champion. However, subsequent stints working in various warehouses and building sites became the order of the day before Nicholson took his first steps into IT through a basic computer course, prior to joining Gwent Police where he served for 10 years. "I got into criminal intelligence and information sharing between police forces, especially after failings on the Soham murders," stated Nicholson. "So I started building my qualifications and experience in information management, cyber security and data protection, eventually becoming Head of Data Management."

You don't need to be gifted with great insight to realise that Nicholson will give almost any challenge a

go and see where it takes him. With a better voice, for example, he could have been making waves not in cyber security but in a recording studio. "I was once a contestant on the X-Factor," he revealed. "I'd never sung in public before and there I was in front of about four and a half thousand people at the Principality Stadium. I didn't get through the judges round but it was a great experience and I'm glad I did it."

Cutting back to his law enforcement days... Nicholson had achieved a Masters in Business Administration then left the police to take up several senior cyber security roles including a spell at IBM. He then established a company that ultimately merged into Bridewell in 2015. "In many ways, personal experiences have prepared me for my current role more than my work experience," added Nicholson. "My sporting background has helped me challenge myself, build a big network and navigate all sorts of social situations. I am naturally good with



Scott Nicholson

In many ways, personal experiences have prepared me for my current role more than my work experience

people and I use this skill every day heading up the team at Bridewell."

Portfolio development

Supporting critical national infrastructure and finance is at the core of Bridewell's strategy, and its market approach is constantly informed by the evolving cyber threat and regulatory landscape that the sector faces. "Our portfolio has developed strongly due to our deep understanding of client pain points, from both the operational and consultancy sides," he said. "Bridewell's services can be combined and customised at every level to meet specific customer needs, which our clients love as it targets common issues like recruitment headaches and employee churn."

Bridewell has also developed a strategic partnership with Microsoft, enabling it to support many organisations in transitioning from multiple suppliers and products to one unified approach. "Another strand to the strategy is growing our existing service lines, primarily 24/7 managed detection and response," added Nicholson. "We're also developing the next generation of cyber talent through the Bridewell academy and our educational partnerships. This initiative is important to me and I'm excited to see where we can take it in the next few years."

Another important strand in Bridewell's growth strategy is global expansion. The company has already opened its first US office and is looking to establish itself

further with acquisitions across North America. "A lot of global critical infrastructure is under invested from a cyber security perspective, particularly regarding skills, so there's a growing need for the services Bridewell provides," said Nicholson. "Part of our plan over the next five years is to expand where there is a great need, and moving into Asia is key to this strategy."

He also aims to maximise on advances in automation, machine learning and artificial intelligence. "When things like ChatGPT emerge we always look at potential use cases and ask ourselves whether it can add value and efficiency to what we do," added Nicholson. "Securing operational technology for industrial control systems is another area we're focused on. Bridewell is already a leader for cyber security in this space, but we've recently invested further by recruiting our first ever Head of OT."

While Bridewell started out as a cyber security consulting company it was always Nicholson's goal to provide organisations with 24/7 threat detection and response. But his readiness to give things a go meant, perhaps, that wearing many hats at the same time is not always the best way to go. "In hindsight I would have invested earlier in non revenue generating roles," stated Nicholson. "It's tempting to try and be a jack of all trades and shoulder CFO and Head of Operations responsibilities yourself to make a profit. But having people in these roles at Bridewell now, and seeing the value they provide, I realise I could've saved myself a lot of pain sooner." ■



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BT Wholesale post-merge

Last December's announcement that BT Group is to combine its Global and Enterprise divisions into a single B2B unit called BT Business raised questions about the potential impact of the merger on BT Wholesale. Here, Channel Partners Director at BT Wholesale Gavin Jones discusses the move and his wider strategy.



Gavin Jones

BT hopes the merger will drive gross annualised cost savings of at least £100 million by the end of FY25 through consolidation and rationalisation of management teams, support functions, product portfolios and systems, so we began by asking...

having led the Global Services arm for several years, which has indirect partners and global wholesale as part of it too. We have someone who has global experience running a wholesale indirect partner channel and who will help BT Wholesale to continue to grow.

How will the unification impact BT Wholesale?

There will be little to no impact. BT Wholesale has operated as part of the enterprise division for several years so there is little change. We currently have separate IT systems so information isn't shared and confidentiality will be maintained after the integration. They are completely discrete systems.

To what extent is portfolio rationalisation planned in Wholesale? And will investment in innovation be impacted?

Portfolio rationalisation isn't planned and innovation isn't impacted. It's simply about not duplicating efforts at times. Rather, it's about having a common investment strategy that caters to the needs of each channel. We must be smarter about investment, like creating single product stacks that we can invest more in to enhance their capabilities and provide more flexibility to partners.

Who will fly the flag for BT Wholesale in the boardroom now CEO Rob Shuter has left?

Bas Burger, our new CEO. He is experienced in wholesale

We currently have separate IT systems so information isn't shared, and confidentiality will be maintained after the integration

What were your primary focus areas and strategic goals in the last year and did you meet them?

It was important that we achieved the overall financial objectives that we articulated to the market. We did this by focusing on the switch to all-IP, the move towards FTTP and the ramping up of the 5G roll out across the country. Smoothing the transition to all-IP is dependent on us providing alternatives to

legacy platforms. One of them is enabling access to greater FTTP provision.

We also announced that – for the first time – our partners could offer EE sims to their customers on a direct, wholesale basis. The EE network had 150 new 5G locations added at the end of 2022. Our objectives this year are to remain focused on the retirement of legacy platforms and the move towards all-IP.

What challenges do you expect to face in the short-term?

As with all businesses we are facing an element of uncertainty due to the economic climate. With inflation remaining high and the threat of a global recession we need to be prepared for rising costs and continuing supply chain issues. We are also putting plans in place to ensure BT Wholesale communicates clearly any



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er plan clarified

price increases or supply chain issues with partners. The skills shortage and the retention of skilled personnel is another challenge. We're looking at our own processes to see how we can address the gaps through training and retention.

How can you, personally, best influence the growth of partner businesses?

By going out and meeting our customers. This gives us a chance to understand their concerns first-hand and to improve our offering by adding solutions that they need, as well as giving us the chance to test new products to understand how they work for resellers and end users.

How will you continue to evolve your portfolio?

Ensuring superfast reliable connectivity will always be the bedrock, but then you can layer on new propositions that improve customer stickiness and performance. Cyber security, for example, is a service that is critical to businesses but probably isn't something you necessarily associate with BT Wholesale, but it's very much something we can work with partners on to keep their customers safe. IoT and other innovations will play a more prominent role too. We'll also develop new APIs across our portfolio that enable partners to connect with our systems, simplifying interactions and providing greater automation.

How far do resellers need to reinvent their businesses in changing times?

As end user needs continue to change, channel partners know that it is not enough to just maintain portfolios. They need to be forward thinking. If they aren't they risk losing their customers to more

progressive competitors. Fortunately, a high proportion of our partners are changing and innovating. It's exciting to see the constant evolution within the industry, there is so much potential."

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

The market for collaboration tools has continued to grow rapidly and we need to make sure our partners are capitalising on this. After a few years of remote and hybrid working businesses consider seamless collaboration and connectivity as critical foundations of a long-term future.

There is also, as mentioned, a greater need for robust security solutions as employees need consistent access to sensitive company data in their homes on their own Wi-Fi network rather than a business grade connection. Partners and their customers must conduct a full security audit of existing infrastructure to recognise any weaknesses. We're also seeing businesses start to understand the value of IoT. As soon as you have strong and reliable connectivity in place you can layer on new services that many considered out of reach a few years ago. The IoT has the ability to enhance business operations and make brands more agile.

Cloud communications, alongside UC and collaboration tools, are also a key trend. Boosted by the move to hybrid working and an increase in the demand for collaboration solutions, as well as the PSTN switch-off, the cloud and the flexibility, scalability and capabilities it enables has never been more crucial.

What message does Openreach's postponement of the Salisbury and Mildenhall PSTN shut downs send to the channel?

Full fibre adoption is a metric by which all operators are measured and our results show increasing penetration quarter-on-quarter. From a wholesale perspective we have seen tremendous change in the overall mix of fibre orders placed in the last 12 months.

Give two examples of how BT Group is driving positive change

Sustainability is a key consideration and we're investing to ensure we achieve BT's Net Zero goals. We've pledged to become a Net Zero business by the end of March 2031 which can be achieved by converting our fleet of BT vehicles to electric or zero emissions by 2030. We've also reduced carbon emissions intensity by 55 per cent and reduced supply chain emissions by 28 per cent since 2016/2017. There is still a great deal of work to be done and this can only be achieved through greater collaboration within the channel.

Our mentoring programme is also helping to drive positive change. It's a great initiative for people of all genders and backgrounds to have a chance at learning from senior leaders, including our MD Alex Tempest. That learning goes back the other way too, meaning our leaders hear fresh ideas and perspectives which is vital for driving change and new opportunities for employees and the company. Success hinges on a common purpose, something that everyone is excited about and driven to achieve. ■

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Grasp your true value

Here, Wildix CEO Steve Osler advances his strong belief that value creation will remain the biggest differentiator in an ever evolving comms market, and he explains why the rise of integrated and value added services will continue to widen the gap between one dimensional resellers and in-demand MSPs.



Steve Osler

Wildix resellers are witnessing a 400 per cent hike in UCaaS revenues which Osler attributes to the effectiveness of the vendor's training programmes and its channel-only opex-first approach. To build on these successes he aims to create more opportunities for partners by positioning Wildix as 'the first unified communications and collaboration platform for the channel'. "We want MSPs and SIs to come to us for flexible solutions that integrate with almost anything," he stated. "From there, they can build their own value through add-on services."

Osler noted that Wildix has a number of 'add-on' products and services coming to market including x-hoppers, a retail-ready solution currently undergoing beta testing via partners with the full version due for release in July. The release

of x-bees, a 'complete sales offering', is also pipelined for launch later in the year. "This integrates with Gong.io and delivers calendar support, with full CRM integration for automated data entry to drive sales team effectiveness," added Osler. "However, we're not changing our approach to the market and we'll always be 100 per cent focused on the channel."

According to Osler, businesses would be doing themselves a big favour by constantly reinventing their modes of operation, including certain channel players who he says would be wise to move with the times. "The legacy PBX market is dying," he commented. "Even though some vendors appear to be shoring up their share of that market with acquisitions, that space is shrinking thanks to the sheer flexibility and redundancy of cloud-based systems. Partners simply cannot afford to be left behind.

There will still be a need for legacy systems, in the same way some people want cassette tapes or vinyl LPs

"That said, there will still be a need for legacy systems, in the same way that some people need cassette tapes or want vinyl LPs. But that market will shrink until it's considered niche. So those who provide goods without thinking of the additional value they offer customers will wither away."

Multifaceted solutions

Osler claims that reseller numbers are certain to 'die off' in this market because just offering UC means missing out on the evolving dynamic between resellers and their customers. "You're not showing the value you offer," he added. "There's no value in offering a UC&C solution and nothing else. And if customers can get

everything they need from a single source it's likely they'll bring everything under one umbrella, especially smaller customers without the time nor energy to manage multiple contracts."

Osler believes that the biggest opportunities will be realised by MSPs that fully empower their people, primarily because IT solutions are becoming more complex – too complex for many internal IT departments to handle. "As a result, those who show exactly what their added value is will make three times that of a reseller," commented Osler. "This is achieved through targeted training and support that helps partners to discover the value

they can provide in solving customer pain points."

In a broader context, Osler says that today's leadership priorities should focus on the shortage of qualified people in the tech industry. "You can't let good people go, yet many businesses are dropping employees as if there was a huge talent pool available," he stated. "It's far better to prioritise employee retention through great development programmes, regular training and a good working environment.

"When you have a massively expanding industry, one that's gone from being only for businesses 20 years ago to being integrated into every aspect of life – home, business, industry, entertainment and socialising – you need to refresh perspectives and investment to get the right people in the right place."

In the short-term Osler expects staffing costs to increase as demand for skills remains high, with implications for cash strapped channel firms. "For MSPs and SIs that's going to prove a big challenge, especially those working on fine margins," he added. "Moreover, the insistence on maintaining connections to physical PBXs may prove unsustainable due to the substantially increased costs of travel, staffing and accommodation.

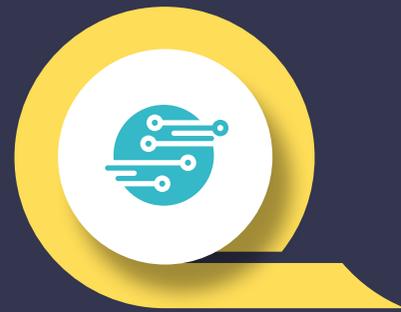
"Against this backdrop, the primary opportunities for growth include choosing vendors carefully, expanding business offerings, providing added value beyond simple solutions, grabbing the cloud communications market and not being held back by legacy capex systems." ■

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A haven for growth

Weston Park in Shropshire, which houses some of the UK's most treasured and highly valued works of art, provided an inspirational backdrop for DWS to frame its first Business Growth Retreat last month.

DWS CEO Terry O'Brien is on a mission to help ambitious resellers gain the education and market knowledge they need to take their businesses to a higher level, and in the opulent Weston Park drawing room housing a Stubbs masterpiece (said to be worth £24 million) O'Brien explained his thinking behind taking selected partners away for some 'private' time with DWS, Giacom and Union Street teams in one of the UK's most treasured country homes.

"It's all about getting to understand our partners more, especially those that have growth ambitions," he commented. "We had something of a one-size-fits-all policy over the last decade and we do a good job of looking after partners, but we want to improve. So we spent time working out what types of partners we have and how we can better serve them. We've got some partners with good growth who are thinking about the next stage of development... do they acquire, sell or get investment? They've

all got different needs and aspirations, and the idea behind the retreat was to share quality time with these partners to get to know them well and work out how we can help them through their next growth phase."

DWS began the process by targeting those partners likely to gain most from the retreat and arrived at 20 key candidates. "It was a significant investment from us in funding the event and from the partners in giving up two days of their time, so commitment was important," added O'Brien.

Content matters

From a content perspective, DWS lined up a cornucopia of talks. Megabyte Chief Analyst Philip Carse covered the market landscape while Oliver Norman and Milan Vashi from corporate finance house Alantra highlighted the considerations when entering into an M&A transaction. Psychologist Jamil Qureshi, who worked with the European Ryder Cup team, provided pearls of wisdom on reaching high performance, and a motivational after dinner speech from Olympic



Mike Wardell, Kriss Akabusi and Terry O'Brien

It's all about getting to understand our partners more, especially those that have growth ambitions

athlete Kriss Akabusi rounded off day one.

On day two, vendor presentations from Andrew Wilson and Mike Greening from CityFibre, Jon Hope from Sophos and Apay Obang-Oyway from Microsoft explored the broadband, cybersecurity and cloud opportunities respectively. "We wanted to stimulate thought processes in partners by bringing in some market analysis, industry expertise and motivation that would get them thinking about their businesses and how they can grow," added O'Brien.

Mike Wardell, CCO of DWS, has previously delivered successful growth events in the cloud-only space and was pleased comms partners reacted well to the concept. "Partners I spoke to enjoyed time out to learn together and think about ways to evolve their businesses, where to place their bets on technologies and how to be ready at the appropriate time should they be looking to sell or acquire," he explained.

"Importantly, it's also given us a chance to understand what we're missing in terms of helping them. It made us

realise the value of bringing together a focused group of partners and doing this type of event more regularly."

Windsor Telecom Product and Solutions Director Nick Shepperd welcomed the strategic focus delivered by the event. He commented: "There was excellent insight into DWS's strategies and valuable information on the comms market and M&A landscape, combined with useful engagement with other telecoms, MSP and IT leaders on the challenges and opportunities our industry faces." ■

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How mobile differentiates and grows competitive advantage

To what extent does the 2025 PSTN switch off play into the hands of resellers with mobile propositions? And how does a mobile and mobile data capability in the portfolio provide a distinct competitive advantage? What more can resellers do to create a winning long-term mobile strategy that works for them

and their customers? Where are the biggest opportunities, and how can resellers without a mobile strategy reimagine their capabilities to maximise the mobile opportunities in front of them? More broadly, what next for mobile in the channel? And should we be building 5G into our strategic thinking now?

Join the debate!

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

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It's time to master all-IP migrations



Steve Blackshaw, Director of IP Migration, BT Wholesale

On January 14th, 1878, Alexander Graham Bell made the UK's first publicly witnessed long-distance call, witnessed by Queen Victoria on the Isle of Wight. Fast forward just under 150 years and the country stands on the cusp of another great technological event. December 2025 will mark the end of the line for the Public Switched Telephone Network (PSTN).

First announced in 2017, we've quickly been moving towards the deadline and there are now major milestones approaching, including the national stop sell of copper-based services on 5th September 2023.

All partners and their customers will find themselves at different stages of their all-IP journey. Early adopters, organisations that started customer migrations around 18 months or so ago, will already be reaping the benefits of diversified portfolios and increased customer stickiness, wallet share and revenues. Conversely, partners who are yet to act are now at real risk of customers not being fully prepped for the switch or losing them to more forward-thinking competitors.

Simply put, there's no longer time to procrastinate. If you haven't acted, you need to now.

What happens if you hold off?

We are all guilty of putting off that one task that needs to be done. Maybe it's because we know it'll be a big job, or we don't know where to start, or you don't want to rock the boat. Yet, if we apply that thinking to the all-IP migration of your customers, real business risks will soon become apparent.

You face a competitive threat to your customer base. You may have long standing legacy customers but if you aren't yet engaging them about evolving to all-IP services, a competitor likely is. Customers need a consultative partner that can support them in their growth and educating them on the need to futureproof infrastructure is a huge part of that.

Customers may also begin to ask questions of their channel partners when their legacy services begin to degrade and they feel the impact. For example, Openreach has announced that by July 2023 it will have introduced restrictions preventing outbound calls on some lines, as well as speed restrictions to FTTC connections around its two trail locations in Salisbury and Mildenhall. For customers who rely on such services, it's imperative that they are migrated to all-IP solutions.

Where do you start?

While it may be a big task, migrating to all-IP can be simplified if you consider some important steps.

- 1.** Create the service roadmap – make sure you have the compelling all-IP portfolio to service customers throughout their journey and increase your diversification. Think holistically, what can you provide beyond new data lines as service layers on top?
- 2.** Consider edge use cases – so many devices rely on PSTN lines to function, it's not just laptops and smart devices, but items such as lift alarms, security signalling solutions and vending machines too. Educate yourself on these less obvious use cases.
- 3.** Engage your customers – speak to your customers early and often. Become consultative and audit them so they understand the breadth of migrations and the timelines – and costs – involved. Then take them on the journey with you through your portfolio.
- 4.** Widen your contacts – customer migration can touch many aspects of operations so don't just focus on one stakeholder, such as the CEO. Engage with the CIO or building manager so that everyone is on the same page and buys into the project.

BT Wholesale's all-IP campaign-in-a-box

We developed Partner Plus to supercharge your business. Critical to that is listening to challenges and responding with solutions. Some partners struggle with a lack of in-house marketing resources so we've created a multi-channel toolkit that has everything needed to run an end-to-end campaign, starting with educating customers about the switch right the way through to migration.

Exclusive to Partner Plus members, the toolkit consists of battlecards, thought leadership articles, shareable visuals, social media posts and a suggested 16-week social timeline, and 8 nurture emails to help guide customers. The content is customizable, so you can add

your own branding and voice, or you can use it to supplement and bolster your own existing collateral. We're here to support our partners and we've collaborated with EBC Group on its customer migrations efforts. As Faisal Iqbal, Group Technical Director, puts it **"Our relationship is very much a partnership. Our account managers are there to listen to, take on board feedback, and provide excellent service."**

Ultimately, the all-IP transition is reflective of the nation's evolution to a more digital enabled society. As organisations look to future-proof themselves, there is a real opportunity for you to become a long-term partner – and it all starts with helping them to migrate.

For more information on all-IP visit - btwholesale.com/all-IP

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 **BT WHOLESALE**

Extending capabilities

Onecom Partners Managing Director Adam Cathcart and Sales Director for CityFibre Wholesale Andrew Wilson discuss the increasingly close relationship between the two companies – and how that’s delivering benefits to reseller partners.

In a market that is more complex than ever – and with skills in short supply – keeping up with the pace of change is a bigger challenge than ever. It’s also a highly competitive market and the choice of who you partner with has never been more crucial. These changing dynamics are the reason that Onecom Partners decided to focus on becoming an aggregator for its partners.

“We made a change in our strategy to become a true aggregator of services, working with tier one providers, leading networks and carriers,” stated Cathcart. “We provide partners with access to multiple products – voice, connectivity and mobile – supported by wrap around services including white labelled support, bureau billing and a marketing concierge. This is all accessed through one partner portal.”

This holistic approach makes life easier for resellers, providing access to the products and services that they might need in one place. And part of that proposition

is providing access to major carriers and service providers, exemplified by the strategic supplier partnership for Onecom Partners and its long-standing relationship with leading altnet CityFibre.

“We conducted a detailed review of our key suppliers and looked at where we had synergies across our group,” added Cathcart. “We wanted to focus on what we saw as being the future suppliers that would be core and instrumental to our strategy moving forward – that’s how we see CityFibre.

“Not only from the perspective that we have a strong and established relationship, but also from a product point of view, and the alignment of people and the way we work closely together. CityFibre was, and is, one of the key relationships that we saw as being part of our future. Indeed, for Onecom Partners, the partnership is seen as being strategically crucial.”

From a CityFibre perspective, the strategic direction of Onecom Partners fitted in



Adam Cathcart



Andrew Wilson

perfectly with the company’s plans, noted Wilson. “With the investments we are making in our network we’re now reaching out to

pointed out Cathcart. “I would say that our supplier relationship with CityFibre is probably one of the strongest that we have,” he added.

CityFibre is one of the key relationships that we see as being part of our future

more areas of the country, and being able to work with Onecom Partners as a trusted aggregator makes sense, not only for us, but for partners who need access to all the products, services and support that they can offer.”

A perfect fit

The close working relationship between the two companies is critical to its success. There are CityFibre people working on-site in Onecom Partners’ offices most weeks and the relationship between technical, sales and marketing teams is excellent,

“The alignment between our organisations, both operationally and also from a strategic perspective, is very strong. One of the key areas that CityFibre shares is our passion for delivering great service. We work with them to provide our partners with 24/7 white-labelled support that is hugely valuable to both the reseller and their end customer.”

It works for CityFibre too, observed Wilson. “All CityFibre wants to do is help partners grow and our alliance with Onecom Partners enables us to

do that really effectively. It helps us to help more partners,” he added.

The relationship between the two companies has grown stronger over the past year and is certain to get even closer as the market develops. Wilson noted: “As our footprint and product portfolio grows there will be opportunities to move more end customers on-net and I’d expect Onecom Partners to be a great help to resellers in taking that opportunity.”

Cathcart is also optimistic about the future. “With CityFibre, we know that as they scale and grow their network reach and capability, we will continue to receive a high quality of support and service – from a technical point of view and with respect to automation and management. This will enable us to continue to support our partners to win in the channel.” ■

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Horton on his 'big hairy a

This month Comms Dealer doffs its hat to FluidOne CEO Russell Horton who has built an ever-ambitious and powerful growth engine underpinned by capabilities that continue to provide real opportunities in the market.

FluidOne's acquisition of Sheffield-based Microsoft Gold Partner Highlander Computing Solutions in January this year boosted group revenues by 35 per cent and increased the presence of IT services in its portfolio to almost 50 per cent. The deal followed FluidOne's investment in Microsoft Gold Partner Marathon Information Technology Services in May 2022 and forms the basis of a key plank in Horton's overall SME strategy. "We plan to scale out Highlander as a centre of excellence within the FluidOne group, leading a branch network of SME IT services in addition to its strength in enterprise IT infrastructure," he said.

Having trebled in size since Horton led the Livingbridge-backed MBO in February 2019 FluidOne is now a £92 million revenue group with 390 staff serving 2,000 customers. The relatively quick growth journey has seen FluidOne transform into a connected cloud solutions provider with nearly 50 per cent of turnover currently coming from IT and cyber services. "We identified

two material opportunities to meet customer requirements," stated Horton. "The need to support mid-market and enterprise customers with Azure-based digital transformation and the provision of local trusted IT services to customers with under 200 employees."

Horton describes his long-term objective as a 'big hairy audacious goal', aiming to more than treble the size of the business to £300 million revenue and 1,200 staff by 2030, while having a brand reputation for impeccable service, strong values and an engaged workforce. So what's his plan? "My key priorities include communicating and evangelising a clear strategy within the business and externally," he explained. "This means setting clear objectives for the leadership team to cascade and communicate across the group, ensuring an aligned approach to achieving common goals. Providing motivational support and leadership to the senior management team is also crucial, empowering them to innovate and be



Russell Horton

We plan to scale out Highlander as a centre of excellence, leading a branch network of SME IT services in addition to its strength in enterprise IT infrastructure

entrepreneurial within their business units."

Great opportunity

Horton joined FluidOne in 2018 when the business was 80 per cent connectivity and 20 per cent mobile, generating £26 million revenue and employing

80 people. "I recognised a great opportunity to take FluidOne as the platform to build out the full portfolio of services creating a one-stop-shop from end user to application, where end users work from multiple locations and applications are typically in multiple cloud and data

centre environments," he added. "Our next stage of growth will focus on building out elements of the portfolio in more depth based on the requirements of different segments in our customer base. This includes areas for enterprise, SME and reseller partners."

audacious goal'

Much of Horton's strategy is underpinned by the acquisition of managed SD-WAN network provider SAS Global Communications in January 2022 – a £19 million revenue business with 120 employees operating on different back-end systems, and with its own

Our next stage of growth will focus on building out elements of the portfolio in more depth

core MPLS network. "The integration of SAS proved to be a major programme of work," noted Horton. "A key metric for measuring the success of the integration was to ensure continuity of high service levels while retaining and motivating staff. By December 2022 we had completed the integration and appointed a number of SAS employees into senior management roles in FluidOne. In January 2023 we reported an NPS score of 85."

Horton will continue to assess acquisition opportunities and focus on staff engagement, values and culture which he sees as critical elements of a winning strategy, along with the vital task of supporting relationship management with stakeholders including investors, partners, suppliers and key customers – all designed to maximise on FluidOne's strong position in a growing market space. "With the continued fragmentation of supply in the UK connectivity market I see the role of the aggregator

becoming increasingly important, particularly for multi-site customers," stated Horton. "We join together the best choice of regional connectivity suppliers into a single simple-to-consume service for the customer. We will evolve our network by continuing to add altnet

providers as they pass enough business addresses and have proven reasonable levels of service quality to be valuable to our customers and partners."

FluidOne's national software defined network, called Platform One, brings

together the services of over 30 carriers and suppliers across MPLS, Ethernet, DSL, FTTP, SD-WAN, SASE, mobile and IoT. Furthermore, Horton has compiled a whole stack of services for FluidOne's connected cloud solutions including SD-WAN, IT enterprise cloud, IT SME managed services, UC, contact centre, mobile, IoT and cyber security. Now, he is reviewing CCaaS options, PowerBI, data lake services, widening the range of cyber services and keeping a watch on the application of ChatGPT.

Employee engagement

As mentioned earlier in this article, Horton is currently strategising his staff engagement and development priorities for the coming year. "We run a wide programme of employee engagement, utilising our own technology platforms to keep our teams connected for regular training, social events and monthly reward and recognition," he said. "We support and encourage the voice of our

people and have introduced employee-led improvement initiatives to empower them to drive innovation."

Strategic shifts

Agility is also key because Horton expects to see economic uncertainty continue to impact customer demand and budgets in some sectors, requiring a strategic shift from FluidOne to align with the challenges of those customers most impacted.

This is also reflective of a strategic challenge facing many channel partners. "To deliver a joined up service resellers need to combine connectivity, mobile, UC and IT services," he commented. "They can do this organically, by acquisition or by partnering for the elements they don't have in-house. We see great results with strategic partners where we sell with them, driving a joined up consultative conversation and bringing together the services required that our partner doesn't have."

The ongoing drive to the cloud and emerging technologies to support this shift are the biggest factors impacting the market, believes Horton, who pointed out the wider implications of a converging market and industry change on resellers. "For several years we have seen IT MSPs moving into the comms space and vice versa," added Horton. "Therefore, resellers need to keep evolving and adopting the technologies that their customers need. Major events like the ISDN switch off are catalysts for this type of change, so resellers need to be on the front foot and proactively leading their clients." ■



Energy is a sweet new offer for Pastel Group

Pastel Group are a market leading Telecoms and IT provider, with offices in Stoke-on-Trent, Southampton and Truro. With over 10 years of working in the SME and Corporate space Pastel pride themselves on having a customer first approach.

Since 2018, the company has added energy to its portfolio and has been successfully supporting and switching its customers ever since.

Explaining what sold them on becoming an energy partner five years ago, Sales Director Ollie Moseley said: "In the market of communications a lot of the growth is by incremental run rate business and if you want to continue that expansion, you must take the wholesale route.

This progression translates to us having full ownership of the customer we are contracting with, enabling us to fully support from end to end.

However, this can be a challenge for any business because you've gone from selling a product, making commission, paying the bills, and repeating that process. Whereas a wholesale margin is made over the life of the contract.

So as a business, it can be quite difficult to make that jump to wholesale.

"Now, something that can help with that is by sourcing a product or service that still works on an upfront model to assist the growth in the business. When we looked at energy, it was such an easy decision to make, as it is just an additional service that slotted into the consultative sale that we're used to. With energy, a lot of the suppliers pay us up front, so it's welcome addition to our ongoing revenue."

After five years of partnership, Ollie outlined what Fidelity Energy do differently that helps them stand apart from the crowd.

"The main piece of feedback I have had from my team is that the outstanding feature is the Fidelity Energy portal. With energy we almost spend the least amount of time on it, but we can get the maximum reward. Unlike a lot of others there are minimal touch points, so in an environment where we just need the information and need it automated, a decent portal is pure gold for any business.

"With the Fidelity Energy team, no question is a silly question and they are constantly there to help us, through onboarding and sales training to support on deals. If there is something we want or need, they will ensure we have tailored support so we can make selling energy a success to our specific customer base. Energy is a market that is forever fluctuating, but they also provide us with all the marketing collateral we need to promote



Pastel Group Sales Director Ollie Moseley

the energy offering as well as information so we can understand the energy market ourselves when discussing it with customers.

"And the thing they have done really well is assign us our own internal account manager. I think a lot of companies only give ownership of an account to one person within their business. Then the problem you've got there is that person is expected to be on the road and to promote, but that isn't always the most effective way, and they cannot always be reactive when something urgent is needed. "Having internal support from a single person backed up by the whole Fidelity Energy team has been really helpful to us."

Pastel has been successful in selling energy alongside its core business of Telecoms and IT, so much so, that it has helped build on existing customer relationships and make their customers more sticky.

Ollie said: "It is nice to have additional product to sell in an incredibly competitive market. If we do a good job with another product it puts us at a strong advantage for the other services we can offer. We have seen a lot of success in adding energy, even with customers who have multiple meters. This has not been an issue and we can help them manage their whole portfolio and take the stress off their hands. Due to this we have recently managed to help one of our larger customers with their electricity contracts and with the extra support we were given from Fidelity, we successfully migrated them over and managed to show the advantage of having strong customer engagement.

"As a company, Fidelity Energy has such a wealth of energy knowledge and experience, so when the energy crisis began, I thought that would almost be the nail in the coffin for energy. But what happened was we managed to help a load of people. The team at Fidelity Energy kept us updated on the market throughout and this resulted in us protecting our customers from some hefty increases.

"We looked like fortune tellers! We were ahead of the curve on something they didn't know about. That's got great cross-sell appeal, because then when we discuss market trends in the communication and IT sector, we have the strongest possible customer confidence."



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4Com Acquires Again: Reach Digital Telecoms is their fourth purchase in just 10 months

4Com is continuing their rapid expansion, coupling strong organic growth with a series of acquisitions. Here's what has been said about each of their acquisitions so far.



Simon Lister
Operations Director at Midshire Telecom

"We really appreciated the approach 4Com took with their acquisition. From the outset they were clear on what they were looking to do and were transparent with us throughout both in terms of process and price. In short, their approach ensured the process was seamless."

4Com's deal with Midshire was completed in May 2022, within 3 months of the initial contact being made.



Haydn Neville
Director at Reach Digital Telecom

"We have really appreciated the patience, honesty, and integrity 4Com have shown throughout the process and we want to thank the whole 4Com team for helping us get to this point. Our team are looking forward to this next step."

4Com's deal with Reach Digital Telecom was completed in March 2023, with conversation having started just 3 months earlier.



Ben Newbury
Director at Bluebell Cloud Solutions Limited

"4Com were very clear from the outset how the process worked, and pulled no last-minute tricks on price, as so commonly seen in the industry. At Bluebell we wanted funding to expand the business further, so we needed an injection of capital, that's where 4Com came in and purchased a large part of our customer base."

4Com's deal to acquire the telecoms customer base of Bluebell Cloud Solutions was completed in February 2023, just 6 weeks after they got in touch.



Russell Marriott
Director at Eastern Voice and Data

"We've been impressed with the diligence, patience and support that 4Com have shown throughout this process. From the outset, they've been up-front and honest with us, and supported us as a smaller business to help both parties reach the desired goal."

4Com's deal with Eastern Voice and Data was completed in November 2022, within 3 months of their initial contact.

If you're interested in selling either your business or your telecoms customer base, please visit

4Com.co.uk/acquisitions





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Aligning with the market

Adaptability and innovation are key attributes for aptly named Evolve IP which has learnt from experience how to navigate and stay ahead of the ever-changing comms landscape. "In the last few years we refocused on our relevancy to the market," Managing Director Paul Harrison told partners at the vendor's first post-pandemic event (March 23rd, Tower of London). "To survive, companies need to find a way to tailor their offering to the evolving needs of their customers. Covid reinforced that 'the only constant is change'."

In this context, Harrison referenced the growing cloud communications market which is being driven by home working and the ever-looming ISDN switch off. In this market Evolve IP expects addressable revenue to grow by 80 per cent from £1.26 billion in 2022 to £2.269 billion by 2026. Its five year forecast sees



Paul Harrison

over 6.8 million additional users moving to a cloud comms solution by the end of 2026, reaching a total installed base of 14.5 million users at 80 per cent penetration.

Harrison told partners: "We have positioned ourselves well to take on the cloud communications market and for us the mid-market and enterprise space is the most addressable area. Companies in this space are looking for value

added partners that can deliver a uniform solution via a single partnership. In 2023 we will work to ensure partners have the tools to address these opportunities."

The groundwork was put in during 2022 after the company saw a requirement for improved visibility in the new flexible working environment. Sales Director Jamie Hughes explained: "Our objectives for 2022 were to ensure that our

technology and solutions aligned with where the market was heading to best support the channel. This has set us on the right steps towards our 2023 priority of further supporting partners with their go to market strategies. We will also be focusing on brand awareness and establishing ourselves more within the global market."

Evolve IP is also seeking to increase its influence in specific industries through partnerships. "If a partner is aligned to a particular vertical we work with them to optimise their own solutions alongside ours which helps them to differentiate," commented Senior Solutions Consultant Adrian Penny. "A simplified technology offering is key to this and our new Anywhere Portal will be deployed to EMEA partners this month. We wanted to bring our portals together with efficiency, automation and simplicity." ■

Unlocking IoT business

IoT potential remains untapped by many comms resellers unwilling to take a first step into this lucrative market, according to Comms365 CEO Mike Van Bunnens. Therefore it should be no surprise that education features as a top priority in the company's 2023 channel strategy. "Where knowledge is lacking it's our responsibility to help educate resellers and their end customers on the growing mobile data market," he stated.

"Secure mobile data solutions are driving incredible growth and we expect this to accelerate throughout this year. Our partners are uncovering some interesting use cases and as cellular data continues to become a trusted technology for mass deployments the case studies will mature even further."

Van Bunnens also noted that Comms365 is doubling down on



Mike Van Bunnens

partner recruitment as it looks to 'supercharge and optimise' its channel operations. This involves becoming easier to do business with by streamlining processes and back office systems. "We will evaluate what has worked in the past, building upon those principles

to ensure we have the capabilities to deliver the most value to partners and their end users," he added.

First step

Van Bunnens advises resellers to deploy mobile data as a first step into the 'misunderstood' IoT market.

"The term has become so broad," he added. "It encompasses many technologies and is often mistakenly referred to as a thing or a product which misses the point. This has led to a million projects that have gone nowhere because the wrong technology has been used."

"But such incidences should not put the channel off. The best way to get into IoT is to pick one technology and concentrate on matching it against a customer base or profile."

Encouragingly, Van Bunnens also noted that mobile data plays to the strengths of those already selling fixed connectivity solutions. "Mobile data with Internet access isn't strictly IoT," he commented. "But it does fall into the broad spectrum of connected technology as an easy introduction to the principles and considerations that need to be expanded upon in larger IoT deployments." ■

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Next steps in analytics

Effective data analytics is at the heart of any successful communications and customer experience strategy – and the evolving collaboration component is set to elevate analytics solutions to the next level, according to Tollring Chief Marketing and Experience Officer Hilary Oliver.



Hilary Oliver

Maximising on the data analytics investment priorities of CEOs is a clear catalyst for channel growth. And to provide good context, PWC's latest global CEO survey showed that over 80 per cent of top execs are investing in technology and tech services around data analytics and operations (the two biggest investment categories). Eighty six per cent are investing in automating processes and systems while 77 per cent are investing in cloud and AI.

According to Oliver, from the channel's perspective these trends are crystallised by the rise of Microsoft Teams and the requirement for collaboration analytics which she believes will be the 'next big area' for investment. "Microsoft presents the biggest market opportunity – and it's evolving fast," she commented. "The move to Teams has changed the world and we all need to move with it. For those working on Microsoft Teams, managers can now access high level

statistical analysis via graphs and trends to understand productivity while avoiding any negative effects on customer satisfaction or the wellbeing of their people. But the issue for many end customers is the lack of visibility into how people are communicating with colleagues, customers and suppliers, so collaboration analytics will be key. Every reseller will have customers using Microsoft Teams and they need to take full advantage."

Tollring is currently experiencing significant growth in analytics with a 27 per cent increase across all territories during the last financial year, and over 50 per cent growth in APAC and Europe. Oliver attributes these upticks in large part to working with partners to help maximise the value of analytics, baked-in to their own offering through integration or white labelling, while leveraging APIs to manage their own customers as well as making analytics accessible to their end users.

"APIs enable analytics to be presented in the way a business needs it, when they need it, for a better experience," she stated. "APIs are also continually evolving, providing flexibility and personalisation in how analytics are delivered, consumed by our partners, end customers and even ourselves to progress our offering."

Experience matters

Solutions that focus on the customer experience should be the number one priority, noted Oliver. "Call analytics has been around for years and is proven to directly impact customer experience, but the new kid on the block is collaboration analytics which delivers insight into internal communication. Businesses need to understand what is happening across their own collaboration and external communications if they are to truly understand their customers' experience."

With most companies expecting to have employees

working remotely over two days per week organisations have become dependent on Microsoft Teams for collaboration through meetings, messaging and voice features – and it's not going away. "Collaboration is at the heart of every business," added Oliver. "Yet in today's remote and hybrid working world where businesses are becoming increasingly reliant on Microsoft Teams collaboration has become invisible, even though productive and timely collaboration impacts customer experience.

"Every business needs to validate that their hybrid working policy works for both their organisation and their people to drive productivity, cultivate wellbeing and support people no matter their role or where they are based. However, to do this visibility of internal collaboration becomes as important as visibility of external collaboration."

There was a time when analytics was a nice-to-have,

but it is now an expected must-have and Tollring's most successful partners are those that include analytics as part of their overall offering. These forward thinkers stand to benefit from an innovation boost later this year when Tollring rolls out AI-driven analytics. "When you add AI to the mix the analytics will become even more powerful," said Oliver. "It's an extension of the idea that context delivers better quality of insight, and therefore, intelligence.

"For example, speech analytics needs context to be effective in certain industries. While we can work around that manually, a solution underpinned by AI is the only way to stay completely relevant as those industries evolve. Therefore we are going to see more intelligence around analytics. This is not just about how the analytics are presented but about adding layers of intelligence over and above the statistics with personalised insights and reports driven and powered by AI."

Analytics is a particularly valuable service to offer customers as it engenders trust and reliance on data. Once a provider offers a level of insight it is difficult for the customer to live without it. "Furthermore, gaining value from analytics no longer requires someone to have a degree in data science or be an expert in PowerBI," said Oliver. "Solutions are presented in a way that are easily accessed and understood by both the provider and their customers. It's about going to market in a complete way, embracing analytics and building it into the whole proposition." ■



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party with the awards ceremony staged in an open marquee followed by networking in the glorious surroundings of London's most elegant Royal Park.

Terry O'Brien, CEO of Channel Champions headline sponsor DWS, commented: "We are delighted to play our part in paying tribute to the amazing professionals in our fantastic industry. Staging Channel Champions in the open air with a festival atmosphere makes this an event to remember. "Winning, or even being shortlisted for these Awards, will bring a huge uplift in morale as everyone feels valued and they can see how their hard work is paying off. Channel Champions will yet again be a fantastic opportunity to recognise the contribution teams have made not only to their business, but to the wider Channel as well. I can't wait," he added.

Event sponsors already lined up for Channel Champions are BT Wholesale, Evolve IP, Nasstar Channel, TalkTalk Wholesale Services, Union Street, Voiceflex and hospitality sponsor Fidelity Group who had this to say about the awards...

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**Alan Shraga –
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Knight Corporate Finance recently advised the shareholders of Unified Communications provider Zest4 on their strategic investment from Focus Group.

This investment will accelerate channel growth opportunities, extend the portfolio of products and services and create a scalable business that will operate alongside the existing Focus Group direct business in the UK.

Mandy Fazelynia, CEO of Zest4, continues to lead the business, together with the current Zest4 directors and existing management team, and aims to double revenue within the next two years, with a firm focus on becoming the wholesale partner of choice to the channel.

Knight ran a competitive process that took into account the differing requirements of the Zest4 shareholders and management team, and its ability to find creative deal structures meant that the Focus deal met all shareholder needs.

Mandy Fazelynia, CEO of Zest4 commented *"It was clear that Knight had strong relationships at CEO level with every party we wanted to include in the process and were able to deliver a genuinely diverse range of offers from some fantastic businesses."*

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Ferris outlines strategic g

Knowing where to start when it comes to planning future growth can be difficult. But Ray Ferris, Group Managing Director for Telecoms at Radius Payment Solutions, is entering phase two of a five year expansion plan, building on existing strengths and accessing new avenues of growth.

For Ferris, creating a dynamic business environment means prioritising organic growth in the existing customer base, new product and service development, increased operations in international markets, potential M&A, unlocking opportunities in adjacent markets and focusing on people development and the broader purpose. All of these elements (and more) reside at the heart of a five year plan that includes operating more effectively with partners. Quite a lot to pull together into a single shared organisational vision.

“My leadership priority is to ensure we have clear direction for the next year and beyond for my teams,” stated Ferris. “Clear strategic direction and an understanding of peoples’ role within that direction may sound simple but is often clouded by pressure or changing demands.

Sometimes a sales target or a particular project can overwhelm, so it’s important to reset, take a break and come back with new focus and energy.”

Business case

Having diligently assessed and paved his pathway to future growth Ferris puts forward a solid business case including cross-selling potential and a smarter operating model that enables the comms division’s product proposition to be leveraged by other arms of the wider business. “Radius is evolving its partner offering across divisions by adding the telco portfolio to our fuel and telematics resellers, giving them the ability to layer products and services for their own customer base,” explained Ferris.

He is also likely to introduce more cloud-based and security products as part of the second phase of Radius Connect’s longer-term plan.



Ray Ferris

Our biggest asset is our people so the impact we can make as leaders and coaching professionals is the most important contributor

“Increasingly, our customers are looking for trusted partners to help with not just their mobility needs – fuel, telematics, insurance and vehicles for example – but to connect and then secure their business,” said Ferris. “The take up of security as a service and IT managed services out-of-the-box for the SME market is of

real interest. We are also looking to add more IT services for SME businesses in Northern Ireland and then Great Britain. And we are watching the market around the adoption of products like Teams with voice and how that plays out versus traditional hosted cloud providers – this will influence our approach.”

The biggest opportunity for Radius Connect is to leverage the global scale and customer portfolio the group maintains. “We have around half a million customers around the world and the opportunity to cross-sell products from our mobility and connectivity divisions is immense,” stated Ferris. “Our plan cements the telecoms

growth priorities

offering across a number of key territories including the UK, Ireland, Belgium, Germany and Italy. This will see us deliver a multi-product offering in those territories."

Ferris' long-term ambition is to overachieve against the five year plan and provide

Sometimes a sales target or a particular project can overwhelm, so it's important to reset, take a break and come back with new focus and energy

a third of group profits in that period. He noted that the foundations to realise his objectives are in place, clearly reinforced by the company's performance. "Last year we grew by circa 20 per cent CAGR and expect the same this year – more so in some product areas," he added. "The growth will be organic from the existing Radius customer base and also through new group activity driven by digital marketing. We plan to increase headcount by 15 per cent year-on-year in line with our five year plan. This includes not just the UK, but also our Irish and German telecoms businesses."

Careful planning and a focus on specific plays last year continued to pay dividends, noted Ferris. "2022 was a big year for organic growth, which, for the first time in the last four years didn't see us do any major mergers

and acquisitions," he said. "We decided to double down on investment in sales teams and refine our product roadmap to allow fast growth in our key category areas of mobile, cloud telephony and connectivity. For the most part we have exceeded the goals we set

but still have areas for improvement around multi-product learning and development, and continually improving the customer experience."

Ferris also sees his role as making sure the training and cultural ecosystem is in place to underpin the business's growth prospects and opportunities. "Investment decisions on learning and

development and product are the primary areas of focus for me at the moment as we look to build the product portfolio and train our teams to become experts in their field," he added. "Our biggest asset is our people so the impact we can all make as leaders and coaching professionals is the single most important contributor."

Greater purpose

It's also crucial that every aspect of the business is geared to deliver sustainable value through a wider purpose as well as culture and strategic planning – and Ferris is seeing this imperative play out in a number of areas. "Diversity and inclusion will continue to be a focus for Radius to provide an inclusive, exciting and vibrant place to work for new labour market entrants," he commented. "And in the last 12 months Radius has invested heavily

in ESG, driving initiatives ranging from staff wellbeing and diversity celebrations to carbon reduction programmes. The sustainable future of the business and its workforce is key to its prosperity and the local communities it serves."

Challenges

In terms of people, we have seen that Ferris is active in several areas, but challenges are evident as competition for talent is unlikely to ease any time soon. "Recruiting the best talent is always the main short-term focus in the current marketplace," he added. "We have plans involving apprenticeships and graduate recruitment, through to sales academies and investing heavily in management to on-the-job skills training. I see this being a challenge for the next few years."

While Radius has grasped the requirement to lead and invest in a future-focused strategy many organisations are yet to double down on charting a pathway to long-term growth. "Business leaders know they need to reinvent their organisations but there is a way to go in terms of knowing what that reinvention means," stated Ferris.

"To move away from traditionally profitable methods of interacting to pure digital is hard for many. Some segments of the market are slower to react to change and they risk losing out on profits by moving too fast. That's why an omni-channel approach fits best. The opportunity for VARs is to understand customer and partner roadmaps and drive value in areas the end customer can't deliver." ■

Engagement analytics key



Mike Wilkinson

Customer engagement-led data analytics that provide insights into where sales opportunities are being missed and the customer experience improved is a supercharged investment area for businesses, according to Akixi's Chief Product and Marketing Officer Mike Wilkinson. "Organisations are becoming increasingly data centric to understand their customer engagement and productivity," he commented.

Demand drivers

Of particular interest to Wilkinson is the potential to forecast future buying behaviour and automate it. "We are early in the process but can see the potential," he added. Another demand driver is the fast RoI for businesses missing inbound customer enquiries, pointed out Wilkinson. He also noted that Akixi's focus is on platform expansion to provide analytics across a range of cloud platforms starting with Cisco and Teams then other common platforms later this year.

Akixi intends to leverage its data lake combined with AI to track business

behaviour trends and boost upsell campaigns and churn mitigation.

Agility wins

"We expect the dominant cloud solutions from Cisco and Microsoft to grow their position in the market," added Wilkinson. "In fact, we believe Cisco will gain ground but at the expense of smaller players not Microsoft. The winners in the comms space will be those nimble enough to build a portfolio of solutions around the dominant platforms and add value with services to integrate legacy or specialised use cases."

Wilkinson noted that the technology skills gap around cloud comms integration, especially with Microsoft Teams, is no barrier providing resellers adopt the right analytics solutions. "Resellers should look for solutions that deskill the complex, especially when it comes to user administration," observed Wilkinson. "Secondly, resellers should look for solutions that can assist in the selling process, making upsell targeting easier and automating the trial process." ■

Collaboration key to tack



The evidence is clear: To tackle climate change and achieve Net Zero targets all parties in the comms channel value chain need to work together to transition to a sustainable model with Scope 3 emissions under firm control. Here, channel leaders provide insights into the Scope 3 challenges they face and why collaboration is key to removing carbon emission roadblocks.



WILL ENNETT
TALKTALK

The value chain can seem complex but tackling it boils down to two questions. Firstly, what do I buy? This is typically the largest area of a telcos carbon footprint and our largest spend is with other telecoms companies so we must collaborate. We chair a Working Group through the Digital Connectivity Forum based on sector decarbonisation, working together to generate sector-wide carbon reductions. The second question to focus on is, what do I sell? Use of Sold Products is typically the second biggest contributor to carbon footprints, as companies account for the electricity usage of the devices they ship. We've integrated sustainable 'design thinking' into how we develop new products and services. Successful measures have included increasing the lifetime of devices by changing the product design and doubling the devices we refurbish and re-use.



DEBORAH JOHNSON
AGILITAS

Silos present a challenge when working towards zero carbon and reducing Scope three emissions. When we work collectively across the channel, this challenge is greatly reduced. Working with partners that share similar ESG attitudes is also vital to achieving success on our own sustainability journey. We need to ensure that our partners have strong sustainability credentials and that we are working towards a common goal. Agilitas launched our e-Ventory charter and signed the sustainability pledge in 2021, committing us to support the channel through a Repair, Rework, and Reduce programme. Providing this service has reduced waste and increased product lifespan. We have also achieved our bronze accreditation with ecoVadis, set clear reduction targets through Science Based Targets and work with Ecologi on global carbon reduction projects and our goal to plant 100,000 trees.



STEPHEN MCINTYRE
NIMANS

The UC market has a big challenge in achieving Net Zero carbon emissions while accounting for Scope 3 emissions. We must take a holistic approach to sustainability by focusing on the impact of our suppliers and customers. Collaboration with supply chain partners is crucial to identify and address carbon emissions throughout the value chain. Sustainability is an important consideration in our business decisions with the sector increasingly prioritising sustainability credentials when choosing partners. Companies can adopt a range of strategies, including investing in renewable energy sources, promoting sustainable transportation options, encouraging suppliers to adopt sustainable practices and developing circular economy approaches. Taking a comprehensive, data-driven approach and collaborating closely with partners are likely to achieve the best results. Achieving Net Zero emissions in the industry will require a collective effort and a sustained commitment from all stakeholders.



JO BALLARD
MAINTEL

We are inventorying our Scope 3 emissions to assess how we can influence and reduce them. Sustainability credentials are key and we always look closely at our partners progress in this field. Our systems and procedures ensure that our suppliers meet our mandatory environmental standards. Each supplier is analysed and risk assessed accordingly with regular reviews. We align our journey to the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Once we have fully assessed our progress from last year we will realign to see if we can match or improve on our goals. Our 'Cloud Seats for Trees' campaign sees us plant 25 trees for every 500 cloud seats ordered and enabled through us. We also add to the Maintel Forest for our recycling efforts and purchase trees to celebrate certain events. Our target is currently 6,000 trees.



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Measuring Scope 3 emissions



STEPHEN WARBURTON
ZEN

Many channel partners are enhancing their sustainability credentials because it's the right thing to do and because those turning a blind eye will struggle to retain their best people and recruit new talent. Customers are also becoming more demanding of their suppliers' sustainability credentials. We have a clear strategy to decarbonise the business. From our base date of 2018 we have an SBTi-agreed set of milestones to reduce Scopes 1 and 2 by 50 per cent by 2028, and Scopes 1,2 and 3 by 50 per cent by 2030. We aim to reduce all emissions by 90 per cent by 2040 and remove the remaining emissions through forestation, soil management or carbon capture techniques. We are on the way to our first milestone having moved exclusively to green energy supply, investing in solar, refurbishing hardware, eradicating single-use plastics, reducing waste and promoting awareness to our people.



IAN DUNSTAN
COBALT

The speed at which tech businesses must adopt new products and ideas becomes a culture and runs through all of us. We were certified as Carbon Neutral early last year, but getting our house in order was an easy task compared to continual improvement. Moving to a much bigger office has been offset by it being modern and needing less energy to heat and cool and taking on more staff has been offset by moving our infrastructure to the cloud. The only real gains to our carbon footprint can be made by partnering with suppliers who haven't just set a date for 2030 because it was the minimum effort. The industry has many suppliers talking but not enough acting. As time goes passes, the responsibility for significant efforts and sustainability will become higher up the agenda when choosing suppliers as partners.



STUART FARRELL
GIGASET

The ICT industry emits up to four per cent of global CO₂ emissions with telecoms generating c1.6 per cent, twice that of aviation. Fibre deployment carries short term impacts across the supply chain including roadworks, raw materials and vehicle emissions, but promises lower greenhouse gas emissions per gigabit than traditional installations. We are reducing our fossil fuel consumption by working with energy providers to prioritise greener energy sources and lower overall gas usage. Our fleet is transitioning towards EV through a range of procurement category strategies and staff incentives schemes. We are also cutting fuel usage with the introduction of speed limiting and a driver coach system (usage has dropped four per cent in nine months). Sustainable procurement, ethics and environment lay at the heart of our strategy. One example is our partnership with Ecologi, which addresses deforestation through sustainable tree planting.



ANDREW DICKINSON
JOLA

To reduce our carbon footprint we opt for greener suppliers, recycle, engage in cycle-to-work schemes and use Teams. This helps the planet, saves money and fulfils the green credentials our partners require of us. The current Net Zero strategy is distracting governments from better policies. Promises from Paris will see us spend \$TNs subsidising wind and solar farms to contribute five per cent of the world's energy by 2050. Fossil fuels will still produce 74 per cent of all energy by 2040 and hundreds of millions of people we could have otherwise taken out of poverty will have died. Governments should focus on a uniform carbon tax, forcing organisations to add the cost of carbon emissions to their prices. Consumers would favour less harmful products and the tax could fund innovation. Less than 0.03 per cent of global GDP is spent on R&D into alternatives, despite a Paris target of six times this.



PAUL HARRISON
EVOLVE IP

Making employees feel like part of the overall sustainability strategy is key. Working for a company that is passionate and cares is very important for individuals so stress their importance and impact. Sustainability credentials are also key from a wider procurement perspective as the channel becomes more selective. Our recent Partner Day at the Tower of London was a climate neutral event and our technology has a crucial role to play. Centralising services in the cloud reduces the overall footprint on-premise where 'big boxes' and telephony switches are consuming electricity on site 24/7. Hybrid work has huge environmental benefits too, reducing business travel and costs and delivering greater agility. Going carbon neutral should be the ultimate objective of all companies and it's important to be ahead of the curve.



JENNY LATIMER
HIGHGATE

Currently being able to measure our Scope 3 emissions feels a long way off. From the research I have undertaken there is a large cost associated to it, in the tens of thousands of pounds - whether that's investing to have internal expertise or engaging with a consultant. This does limit the progress of smaller organisations when developing their sustainability strategies. Hopefully Scope 3 measurements will become easier once larger partners are able to share their measurements and we are able to use them to support ours.

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Woodhead returns with h

Simwood CEO Simon Woodhead stepped back from hands-on leadership in 2021 to support the medical challenges of one his three daughters. Now back at the helm, his strategic focus and appetite for growth have perhaps never been sharper.

To say that Woodhead is crystal clear about his strategic priorities would be to understate the nature of his ambition and clarity of vision. "Taking a year out of the hot seat has enabled me to come back with a fresh perspective," he stated. "The next three years are critical for us. We're ahead in terms of infrastructure and positioning and I see Simwood as the life raft for those in the industry who want to focus on their own business and not be burdened by their carrier's underinvestment and need to play catch-up."

Following his period of near absence, which provided mind space for new corporate initiatives to take shape, Woodhead hit the ground running on his full return to drive a programme of assiduously thought out strategic improvements. "I've made significant changes to address things that took hold while I was away and from seeing the wood from the trees on my own past

initiatives," he said. "I've also experienced first hand the impact a leader can have simply based on tone and direction, something that was easy to question before."

Following 27 years of uninterrupted growth, and 2021 being the best year on record, last year marked a pause in a number of respects, noted Woodhead. "Culture and motivation had suffered resulting in an impact on sales and customer service," he added. "Those issues were the first to be addressed and came good quickly. Now I'm focused on energising sales growth along with cementing internal improvements. We have a hungry team and a high level new business opportunities that have dwarfed 2022 growth in the first two months of 2023."

Key objective

Woodhead's primary objective this year is to get back to where he was in 2021 with the 'real growth' coming in 2024. "We're adopting a simple strategy



Simon Woodhead

Simwood is 27 years old and my focus is on the next quarter of a century. Any business that isn't assuming they'll be infinite will be limited and reactive. Sadly, I see too much restricted thinking across our sector

to achieve that... cutting waste and growing revenue while keeping margin and overheads tightly controlled," he added. "The PSTN switch-off is huge for us. We're ahead in IP migration having solicited an invite to what I

called the Secret Club some years ago – in other words, our IP migration with BT is done and dusted while we enjoy grandfathered economics available to proper networks. This means our carrier services customers do

not experience disruption when migrating number ranges or re-engineering our network to accommodate the PSTN switch-off. On the flip side, we have a product set that is exactly what the market is looking for now."



high intent

The majority of Simwood's business comes from carrier services such as providing numbering and calls to those operating platforms and running their own channels (Simwood is also licensed to operate across 100 per cent of the US). This continues to be where Woodhead sees important future growth with new

We skated to where the puck was going, now we're ready and waiting for it

customers including those providing mission critical services to government and enterprise as well as Simwood's platform serving the financial services industry and SMEs through circa 200 UC platform providers.

Portfolio development

"We're a strong and agile alternative to the biggest carriers, and one of the main hosts of number ranges in the country," explained Woodhead. "But in 2019 we made some acquisitions that gave us the complete vertical, including white labelled UCaaS serving 140 or so partners and our own direct to market brands for customer profiles not served by partners.

"In the confluence of those areas we developed a PSTN replacement service in 2021 which is going great guns – our major customers being alternative networks that need a PSTN replacement at a good price point and scale. I can't overstate the power in owning our own supply chain."

Woodhead's confidence in the long-term viability of Simwood is supported by his foresight and pedigree in adapting to market conditions ahead of time. "We skated to where the puck was going, now we're ready and waiting for it," he said. "Simwood is 27 years old and my focus is on the next quarter of a century. Any business that isn't assuming they'll be infinite will be limited and reactive. Sadly, I see too much restricted thinking across our sector."

Preparations for growth also involve a 'significant degree of growing up', pointed out Woodhead, including developments to HR policy, investing in people, carbon audits and further investment in ISO 9001 and 27001 awards. "In many cases this is simply putting a formal tick against something we've always done," added Woodhead. "We already produce 28 per cent less CO2 than the industry average and 30 per cent of what we generate is mitigated by our own solar farm."

Woodhead's approach involves bold activism and giving the megaphone to industry issues while locking horns where necessary. "We've always picked fights with regulators and peers where necessary to drive a positive outcome for end users," he said. "That approach has led to me being given many names over the years, but it's paying off. For example, look at our action around the CPI+3.9% shenanigans. However, the biggest challenge facing the industry is regulatory and the fact that competition has failed in our sector." ■

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Striking a full fibre opti

Full fibre will be the overarching story of 2023 and beyond, overshadowing many other industry themes, according to panelists on last month's Comms Dealer Insight Session. But striking a balance between optimism and adoption remains a significant focus with the drive for effective marketing, among other determining factors, key to increased take up.

The Insight Session proved to be a good indicator of how the full fibre landscape is evolving and revealed that optimism is high among the key players. Their key message? It's time to accelerate your full fibre ambitions. So what's in store for the channel, and how can partners maximise this important growth prospect? Paul North, Head of Channel, Giganet, explained how a no frills on the ground marketing strategy can deliver success for altnets and ISPs. "Those proactive partners who are committing time, energy and focus to understanding this opportunity are the ones seeing success," he said. "Their activities include good old fashioned canvassing, door knocking, getting out

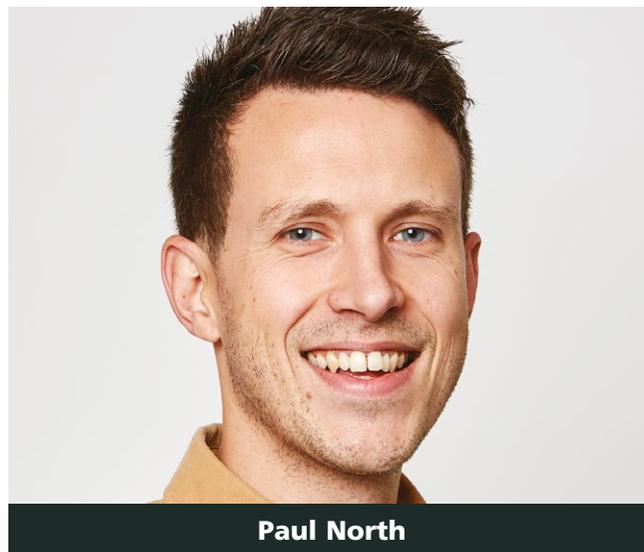
there and seeing people at street level. Many altnets have great community ambassadors that raise awareness, and the partners tapping into that are seeing serious success."

Our panelists anticipate unprecedented growth during the remainder of the year and beyond. But perhaps surprisingly, one of the most significant marketing interventions is based on a word of mouth powered approach. Matt Baker, Head of Wholesale, FullFibre, commented: "After a partner's first sale in a particular street you can see the neighbours coming days or weeks later. It really is word of mouth contributing to the marketing done by ISPs. You also see



Matt Baker

It's easy to focus on the bandwidth and price points but it's also about the service experience, the migration, the risk of change – and word of mouth is key to this.



Paul North

This really is the year to grab the opportunity. Properties are being passed at a rate of knots and it's a gold mine. Collectively we are all doing a great job at raising awareness.

feedback on group chats. It's easy to focus on the bandwidth and price points but it's also about the service experience, the migration, the risk of change and word of mouth is key to this."

Adaptability

A successful approach is also about being more agile in marketing, which leads to built-in resilience when word of mouth takes hold, enabling users to make full fibre decisions with greater confidence. Ultimately, with the right combination of nuts and bolts customer engagement fibre providers are able to build trust, cement their reputation, gain a competitive advantage and move faster.

Dan Ramsay, CMO, CityFibre, added: "2023 will be the biggest year ever and next year even bigger as the technology roll out grows and awareness among businesses and consumers continues to accelerate. The most powerful marketing is always word of mouth and this will increasingly become the norm as the roll out matures. We see the snowball effect where you reach a critical mass in a particular town, city or region and it sustains itself without too much of an extra nudge. It's only going in one direction."

Ramsay also noted that marketing pays off more when tailored to different user groups but predicting

where the future is going to take consumers and businesses is more difficult. "There are many hypothesis about where the metaverse is going but I don't think anyone does not believe that it won't happen in some guise," he added. "The bandwidth demands will be infinitely greater than what we see today. It's going to happen so let's get ahead of it."

Despite the importance of full fibre adoption it remains the case that barriers to take up still exist. Nick Tiddy, Head of Business Development, Zen, observed: "We're still seeing mixed perceptions around the urgency of a fibre strategy. Zen is playing its part in terms of webinars and intelligence sharing; and we're looking at a stop-sell in our partner division in late July or early August to get ahead of the September stop-sell."

Full fibre acceleration presents a particular challenge to slow moving CPs and that's an advantage not to be missed by the more agile and proactive go-getters. Inaction and inertia is a significant threat, leaving certain partners and their bases exposed. "We have to be consistent with the message that this is happening and emphasise the urgency for partners to be ahead before the

mism-adoption balance

competition moves in," added Tiddy. "We are seeing most success where partners have grasped the urgency with a first past the post mindset. Those partners want to discuss bespoke commercial deals that give them a competitive advantage, focusing on a fibre-first approach and then differentiating through their own value add."

Contract matters

However, new technology adoption can take more time if barriers exist and Baker is acutely aware of one pressing challenge facing the industry. "The main barriers we see are people still in contract on their legacy infrastructure and the complexity of moving them when they are out of contract," he said. "With mobile phones it's relatively easy and seamless – that's lacking in our industry. This raises some key questions: Are the national players creating a barrier to people moving to better technology? Should they re-sign for up to two years if there is a risk that the property will be switched off? Is there going to be a get-out-of-

contract option if you can get FTTP and your comms is being switched off?"

Closer industry collaboration would no doubt help the industry to meet these challenges and also Openreach's 2025 PSTN shutdown deadline which straight off the bat hit a problem when the two pilot areas were delayed from April to October this year. "The Salisbury and Mildenhall delays aren't a sign of indecision," stated Tiddy. "This is more a change of tack, a softer approach to drive and influence behaviour, driving the end user to speak to their service provider. But service providers like ourselves must be ready for the conversation. There are some parties that aren't as far down that journey as they could be. A sensible approach is to challenge the inertia."

The postponements do not mean that the industry can hit pause when it comes to increasing the pace of all-IP proliferation, and North provided some insight that may prove telling in the long run. "Salisbury is the first



Nick Tiddy

We have to be consistent with the message that this is happening and emphasise the urgency for partners to be ahead before the competition moves in.

exchange we unbundled with Openreach and our experience there has been good," he added. "Take up is strong. And Salisbury has an older demographic so we were surprised by the adoption rate. But it is likely that the 2025 deadline will be stretched out."

The wholesale question

In terms of driving greater full fibre take up, Baker is surprised that more altnets have not gone wholesale because of that adoption challenge and the fact that people don't want two or three poles serving one street. "It's costly," he stated. "We've built in areas where there wasn't an altnet so it was either us or the incumbent. Overbuild doesn't make sense for the consumer or the market."

North cited the idea that having multiple providers could be good for customers and drive competition. "But it's probably more important that altnets wholesale their infrastructure which gives more choice of ISP, creating competition and better value for the consumer without

the disruption of roads being dug up by different altnets," he added. "We'll see more consolidation this year and more altnets open up to wholesale. This really is the year to grab the opportunity. Properties are being passed at a rate of knots and it's a gold mine. Collectively we are all doing a great job at raising awareness."

It is clear that one of the most decisive issues facing the comms channel is full fibre adoption and the evolution of the fibre provider space, not least because a failure to respond could compromise the strategies of both altnets and CPs. Furthermore, future success is not just about striking the right balance between optimism and adoption, it's also about striking while the iron is hot this year.

"We'll see much steeper growth as the roll out reaches such scale that it's the norm," said Ramsay. "It just takes a while to creep into the consumer's consciousness. It's similar to electric cars – more people are buying them now than three years ago." ■

More insights...

Talk to customers about how full fibre is future proof and how the switch off is going to impact them. The recipe for success is clear.

Dan Ramsay, Chief Marketing Officer, CityFibre

Demand is increasing but we need to make sure it's easier for end users to move to better technology.

Matt Baker, Head of Wholesale, FullFibre

There is still the 'so what' factor prevailing outside of the industry. However, this dormancy in the market will be catalysed by the 2025 deadline.

Nick Tiddy, Head of Business Development, Zen

We have to pass the early stage adopters and technology enthusiasts who grab the bull by the horns as soon as it's available.

Paul North, Head of Channel, Giganet

We measure the level of switching in our network areas and it's many times the national average.

Dan Ramsay, Chief Marketing Officer, CityFibre

A battleground is the correct analogy and partners have got to get to conversations with their clients first.

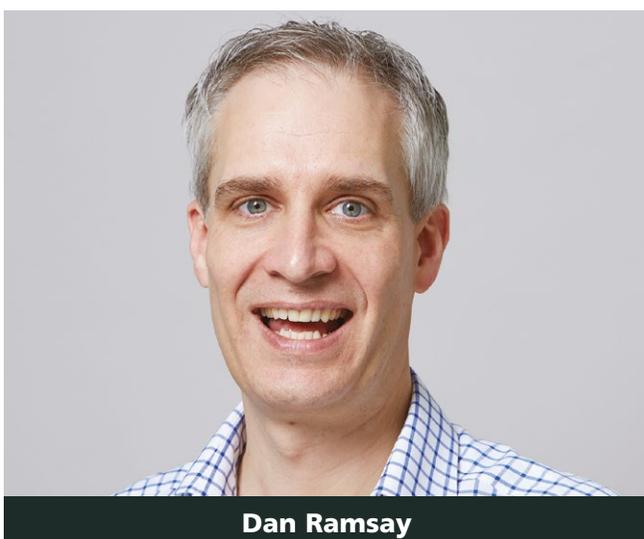
Nick Tiddy, Head of Business Development, Zen

It's incredibly important to tailor marketing approaches.

Paul North, Head of Channel, Giganet

This year we'll see more consolidation and more people going down the wholesale route.

Matt Baker, Head of Wholesale, FullFibre



Dan Ramsay

The most powerful marketing is always word of mouth and this will increasingly become the norm as the roll out matures in different parts of the UK.

D&I leader continues to r

Incoming VP of Diversity, Equity & Inclusion at NTT Data UK&I Clare Stephens has set about creating a more diverse and inclusive working environment, building on the company's achievements so far as a Financial Times Diversity Leader.

Prior to joining NTT Data UK & Ireland in January this year Stephens held a number of HR leadership roles at IT and tech services provider IBM including D&I leader for EMEA, a role she held since 2017. Stephens' clearly stated priority now is to 'drive forward NTT Data's mission to make the organisation, and the industry as a whole, a more equitable and inclusive place for everyone'. Here's how...

How are you taking a lead on the issue of increasing female representation at the top of your business? Increasing diversity and representation is critical to the success of NTT Data UK&I. I am currently re-evaluating every aspect of female development – our internal initiatives and programmes, our talent pipelines and other resources to determine areas for improvement. Once the assessment is complete I will work with internal teams to strategise and develop plans for how to make our diversity more reflective of

society and our clients. This will likely mean improving current programmes, talent pipelines and resources as well as introducing initiatives that will make the organisation a more inclusive environment for all.

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

NTT Data UK&I currently works with a selection of charities and partners that I plan to join and learn from. To name a few, NTT Data works with the 30% Club, The Prince's Trust, Brilliant Breakfast and Women in Data, among many others. Working with partners like Women in Data, for example, will help inform strategies, programmes and resources that are important for women to have access to at any company. Partners like this can also help identify ways for organisations to make careers in STEM more attractive to women, playing into big factors that help build talent pipelines and increase diversity, feeding into attraction and role modelling.



Clare Stephens

By not supporting female leaders and a strong diverse presence in boardrooms businesses are self-sabotaging, letting other companies, industries and competitors pass them by

What barriers are there to having more women on boards and how are you addressing these challenges?

Finding a healthier, more diverse talent pipeline is challenging, in large part because of the lack of role modelling and female amplification. Some

technology companies are working towards diversifying talent pipelines by improving internship, graduate and mentorship programmes. Improvements like these have helped to a point, but talent pipelines are still lacking significant numbers when it comes to applicants. We

also need to look at inspiring the next generation and showing them the career paths they can take.

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

There are many ways to boost the number of women

make an impact

on boards and more generally across the technology industry. Role modelling, for starters, is a fantastic way to encourage younger generations of women to step out of traditional gender restraints that 'tell'

I am committed to being an upstander and an advocate for anyone who needs to be met where they are at any moment, with more flexibility and an absence of fear

them what they can or can't do. The opportunity to see women happy and successful in professional positions proves that they too can be successful in those roles. People need to see someone who represents them to feel inspired, motivated and supported.

Amplifying women internally and externally is another way to encourage the participation of women in boardroom settings. This could be anything from spotlighting female employees on social media to putting them forward for media opportunities or engaging them in conversation, especially ones that are being dominated by other voices. It is also important to remember that it is not the sole responsibility of women to support and propel other women forward. It is for co-workers, companies and industries to play their part too.

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

A diverse presence in any boardroom is essential and speaks volumes about how committed an organisation is when it comes to diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI). It is also important to have a variety of backgrounds, cultures and various other identifying factors. The more diversity in a room, the greater the variety and strength of ideas proposed. In general, the tech industry traditionally has not elevated DEI as a top priority. Up against new

technology innovations, product launches and funding rounds, DEI has been neglected. But those companies pushing aside DEI fail to consider that they are limiting the ideas that could help fuel innovations, launches and more. By not supporting female leaders and a strong diverse presence in boardrooms businesses are self-sabotaging, letting other companies, industries and competitors pass them by.

What have been your experiences during your career in terms of being female?

I've had my share of road bumps and setbacks as a woman working in the technology industry. Most of them were around the midpoint of my career, a time that proved to be most challenging for me as a new mother. I was returning to my position from maternity leave and my situation was much different from when

I left to have my baby. I was returning to a full-time role with a one-year-old, a recent divorce, learning to navigate each day as a single parent, and was becoming accustomed to different life circumstances compared to when I left. Despite this and my need for flexibility I was treated with little accommodation and left that position with some haste. It was a career-limiting move at that time but one I had to take for practical reasons.

There are many women who have experienced similar occurrences where they are offered little to no flexibility as single parents, forcing them to find new roles, companies and ways of life. Because of my experience, I am committed to being an upstander and an advocate for anyone who needs to be met where they are at any moment, with more flexibility and an absence of fear. Many women like myself have also experienced micro-aggressions during their careers, primarily from male counterparts, whether intentional or not. In one of my previous roles I was the only woman in a large team. All my counterparts were male and, even though we all held the same title, I was frequently singled out and asked to make coffee and copies.

How typical are your experiences?

Many women have faced setbacks and experienced things like me. According to our own research, in 2021 nearly three quarters of women have had a negative experience at work because of their gender. One of the most important lessons I've learned from

Continued on page 42

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Chip off the block



Primed for channel growth: Kevin and James Boyle

FATHER and son team Kevin and James Boyle are set to turn up the heat as Clouddcell Technologies enters its next phase of growth following a year of expansion and a renewed focus on strategic channel building.

The appointment of James as Senior Channel Account Manager, five years after he joined the

company his father established in 2015, marks the beginning of this new chapter. Clouddcell Technologies Managing Director Kevin Boyle enthused: "James has developed a passion for technology and displays a keen skill and ambition in growing our channel offering."

James added: "The promotion means I take responsibility for driving sales and new partner acquisition, building on the inroads we have already made with partners in the channel."

Also on the move...

FORMER Ensono VP Business Operations Matt Halford has joined Focus Group as Chief Operating Officer with a remit to gear the business up for operational scale as part of a new growth phase. CEO Barney Taylor said: "Matt has a wealth of experience and a track record of driving growth, operational efficiency and customer service in both mid-sized and enterprise scale organisations.

He will help accelerate the integration of our people, systems and processes, as we continue to deliver on the One Focus Group objective across our UK operations."



Matt Halford

SCOTTISH MSP Brightsolid has appointed Andy Sinclair as CTO and David Taylor as Head of Cyber Security. Sinclair was formerly Director of Product at Iomart and brings over ten years of technology experience spanning engineering, architecture and cloud transformation.

Taylor's career started in the military where he spent 10 years managing communications and information systems on board Britain's



David Taylor and Andy Sinclair

nuclear submarines. For the past decade he has been building and managing Security Operations Centres, securing cloud and on-premises infrastructure and conducting information security and compliance audits. Brightsolid CEO Elaine Maddison said: "We're an ambitious business and Andy and Dave bring expertise and experience to drive our growth plans."

AGILITAS CEO Shaun Lynn, Chief Marketing Officer Richard Eglon, Solutions Director Mike Cummins and Finance Director Steve McMullen have left the business while new Chairman Mark Dixon moves in. Dixon brings over 25 years manufacturing and distribution experience having run public and private equity-backed companies with turnovers ranging from £55m to £400m.

FORMER SpliceCom Head of Sales Stuart Bell aims to ring up stellar sales figures as incoming Voip Unlimited Business Development Manager. Bell has a strong comms industry pedigree with spells at Avaya and Mitel under his belt prior to a 17 year stint at SpliceCom.

JOEL Chimoides is to head up Nuvias UC as CEO following the departure of Jeremy Keefe, moving from Maverick AV Solutions Europe where he was Vice President. Gwyn Hicks has also joined Nuvias UC as Chief Financial Officer, taking over from James Orton.

Continued from page 41

my experiences is that people still underestimate the power of words. There are so many pejorative terms that are still used to talk about women with much fewer still being used for men. Many of the terms targeting women are considered more acceptable to toss into conversations and, whether the harm is intentional or not, the damage is still done. To move forward it is important to consider the influence words can have and that just because they don't hurt you, that doesn't mean they won't hurt someone else.

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

This answer lies much more in systemic policies

Gender progression still isn't something top of mind when considering who fits in as a leader or when considering why diverse opinions on leadership teams are essential for progress. Women will typically wait to be told they are ready for a promotion whereas men will typically put themselves forward for it, often resulting in quicker progression to leadership roles.

Leaders should assess their organisation to understand how many women are promotion-ready, then overlay that with how many women are in the promotion process. Typically, there will be a gap here when compared to men and we must understand why that is. Data insights are key to this understanding

I've had my share of setbacks as a woman working in the technology industry

instead of how women can influence their own ability to achieve board level positions. Companies need to implement programmes encouraging womens' progress and introduce procedures to support them on their journey to board level positions, instead of asking women to find the solution themselves. Something I think everyone should do when searching for a job is to look for an organisation that shares their values, will support them and will listen to them. I personally look for role models at companies and leaders who won't leave employees to fix problems independently but, instead, will collaborate with employees to action internal and external change.

In your experience, do leadership pipelines include enough women?

As it stands, leadership pipelines do not include nearly enough women.

of the status quo, before resolutions to solve this discrepancy are put in place.

Has the ICT sector in general made progress on increasing diversity at a leadership level?

Progress is being made but it's moving slowly. Covid created a setback to the progress made, but things are once again moving in the right direction. It will take time, and those who are most successful will commit to improving DEI as an organisation. Appointing DEI-specific leaders to boards and developing diversity strategies that prioritise equal representation are two ways to communicate a commitment to DEI. It's important that organisations such as NTT Data UK&I continue to set an example of how to approach this critical subject and how the right strategy can not only create a better working environment for all, but also increase revenue. ■

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