



Reasons to foster female talent for the top jobs p22

Neil McArthur: The story of a comms sector giant p24



VOL 28 ISSUE 4 SEPTEMBER 2023 www.comms-dealer.com



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This month's movers and shakers



End bias against the neurodiverse

AMPLIFYING the conversation on neurodiversity inclusion is a strategic and moral obligation for businesses, according to diversity champion Julie Mills, CEO, Support to Win, who says not to do so devalues every inclusive declaration.

SPECIAL REPORT

Mills (pictured) has called on the ICT sector to take a lead in ridding workplaces of systemic bias against neuro divergent people, of whom just circa 20% are in any kind of work.

"It is appalling that so few neurodiverse people are in employment," she commented. "Company leaders are proud of adhering to the Equality Act but where is the neurodiversity piece in that?"

"There is a big talent pool that businesses, especially in the tech industry, are ignoring. If we fail to recruit neuro divergent people we're potentially missing out on employing the next Elon Musk or Bill Gates."

She says tech firms stand to gain most from the capabilities of people who are not neurotypical, and she noted that it is straightforward to make changes that embrace neurodiversity.

"We had a relatively new person in the business break

down and say, 'I've never been able to come out before and open up about my autism'. That is very sad," she added.

"There is an opportunity for businesses to gain a competitive edge by giving neurodiverse people the right support to do amazing things.

"Wouldn't it be great if the comms sector had its own charter to drive home the message that this industry is right for neuro divergent people because the support is there." See p32

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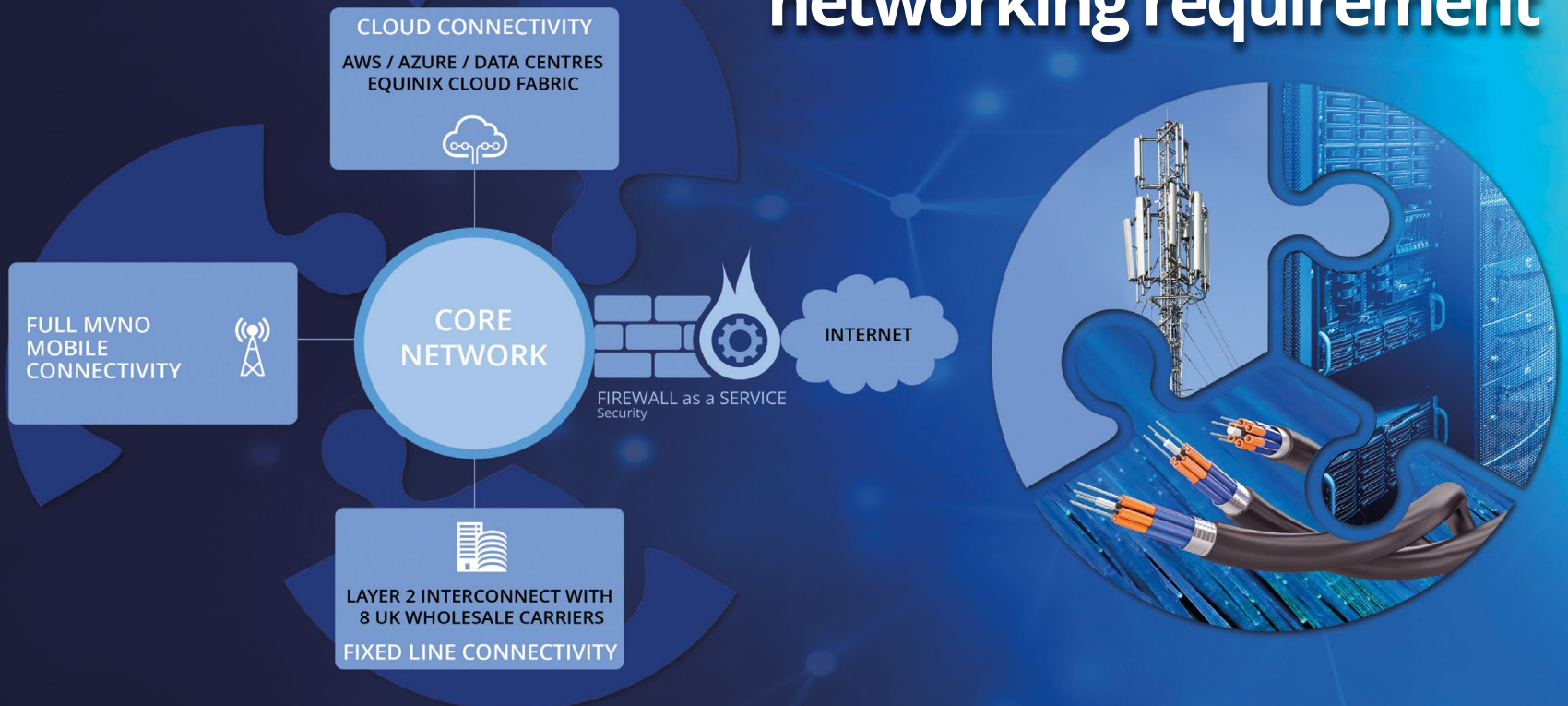
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EDITOR'S COMMENT



Stuart Gilroy

WHEN we look at the insights contained within Phil Carse's (analyst at Megabyte) market performance and trend update on page 40 we see again that the sector is ticking along, displaying resilience amid a number of pressures. But something tells

me that the ICT channel could be doing more in terms of making the most of available opportunities, because industry disruption and transformation is a stimulus for growth and few industries, if any, are undergoing change to the extent we have been witnessing for some time.

True, the comms sector continues to show itself as robust in tough times, but should we expect anything less when we consider the fertile conditions for long-term growth? Not only is digital transformation one of today's leadership priorities among organisations, the digital products and services business leaders, and ICT resellers, need are there for the taking, enabling the channel to address sweet spots such as UCaaS and CCaaS in the SME market, along with cloud and hybrid working solutions etc, backed up by security and a raft of other technologies that help customers become more profitable, streamlined and efficient.

These are the major ICT purchasing drivers and it has become clear that the trend is for end users to partner with a one-stop-shop for all services.

Therefore we must consider whether ticking along at the moment fits the bill, and bear in mind that it will be the comms and IT resellers who are evolving as digital MSPs that will gather momentum, break away from the mainstream treading water, and thrive with a competitive advantage.

For those in need of a strategic reset, perhaps Openreach's UK-wide stop-sell, which came into effect on September 5th (see below), will help focus minds on the opportunity to re-engage with customers and build sustainable and profitable long-term relationships.

Stuart Gilroy, Editor

Focus builds on Microsoft cloud stance



Barney Taylor

BOWMARK Capital-backed Focus Group's Microsoft practice has received a boost following its investment in cloud consulting and cybersecurity firm &Partners, which was founded in 2017 and serves direct and channel customers across the UK and Europe.

Focus Group now has partnerships in place across cloud, cybersecurity, connectivity and SASE, enabling it to significantly build on and expand its enterprise division.

CEO Barney Taylor commented: "This is our second acquisition this year, adding new capability and scale into our cloud consulting business.

We are seeing strong growth with Microsoft and searched the market for some time before finding a fit with &Partners to accelerate our cloud business."

&Partners founding partner Joe Ashley remains in the business. He added: "With this acquisition &Partners gains access to Focus Group's resources and market knowledge, while we bring expertise in enterprise cloud and cybersecurity services."

Focus Group was established in 2003 and has over 27,000 business customers.

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

NEWS ROUNDUP

MANAGED service provider Redcentric reported preliminary full year revenues of £141.7m, up 52% and driven by acquisitions. Organic sales increased around 6%. During the period the company acquired 4D Data Centres, Sungard Consultancy and Sungard Data Centres, adding service scale and cybersecurity capabilities.

NIMANS' reseller base has access to Mitel's products and services following a new distribution deal that includes the vendor's cloud-based phone systems, collaboration tools and contact centre solutions. Nimans MD Paul Burn stated: "This collaboration represents a significant milestone for Nimans."

BOURNEMOUTH-based 4Com has sealed its eighth deal in 16 months with the acquisition of part of the business telecoms customer base of FT Security Systems (FutureTel). The transaction follows the purchases of Midshire Telecom, Eastern Voice and Data, Reach Digital Telecoms, Southern Business Communications, and the deals for the telecom customer bases of Bluebell Cloud Solutions, Meridian IT Communications and Fairfield Telecom.

Openreach brings in WLR stop-sell across UK

COMMS providers not prepared for the September 5th stop-sell – which saw Openreach end the sale of WLR across the UK – will need to act fast and get on track with the move to all IP, warned James Lilley, Director of Managed Customer Migrations, Openreach.

He said the stop-sell marks an important step towards the UK's digital transformation and is a reminder that the PSTN network will be switched off by the end of 2025, a move first announced in 2017.



James Lilley

"The PSTN is outdated and difficult to maintain," said Lilley. "Skills and parts are increasingly difficult to come

by and new digital services like VoIP, video conferencing and a whole range of apps have become more popular."

The stop-sell means that when CPs' customers sign up to a new contract – or when they switch, upgrade or re-grade their service via their provider – they'll be moved onto a new digital line rather than an analogue one.

"We've collaborated with CPs for years to help them prepare for the change," said Lilley. "We'll continue to work with our CPs to upgrade vulnerable customers and those using Critical National Infrastructure as safely and smoothly as pos-

sible. We have the processes in place to ensure this happens."

The preference is to deliver digital services over a full fibre network. Lilley noted that Openreach has so far made fibre available to 11 million homes and businesses nationwide.

"Since 2020 we have gradually stopped selling copper services in exchanges where we have built full fibre," said Lilley. "This covers more than 500 of our exchange areas, that's 4.6 million premises so far and will continue at pace."



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NEWS ROUNDUP

EX-TELIA Company President and CEO Allison Kirkby is poised to take over as BT Chief Executive when current CEO Philip Jansen steps down in January 2024. She has been a Non-Executive Director at BT Group since 2019 and is also a Non-Executive Director and member of the Audit Committee of Brookfield Asset Management. "Having been a member of the BT Group board for the past four years I'm fully supportive of our strategy," she commented.

CROFT has snapped up **Blackstar Solutions** adding capabilities in voice communications, video conferencing, mobile and Internet security. Croft also acquired London Colney-based **ClearLink Telecoms and Data**, particularly adding expertise in the education sector.

FORMER Nimans Group Sales Director Richard Carter has joined **JPL** as Non-Executive Director. Carter left Nimans in July following a near 40 year career with the distributor. "Having worked with JPL for 18 years as a customer I have respect for its ability as a UC end point manufacturer," stated Carter. "We plan to launch a new range of products and increase our exposure to the market."

Gamma acquires Satisnet

GAMMA'S acquisition of MSSP Satisnet strengthens its security play across the UK and European regions.

Satisnet began life in 2004, has 48 employees and 1,000 customers and is best known for assessing and discovering vulnerabilities, mitigating risks and deploying security measures for firms of all sizes. The company has top level partnerships with industry big guns including Microsoft and Tenable.

Gamma Enterprise MD David Macfarlane said: "We have joined forces to cater for the growing needs of our expanding enterprise and public sector community, providing security solutions to safeguard their digital infrastructure."

Macfarlane noted especially that customers have a requirement for reliable network security, defence against cyber threats and protection from predatory attacks.

Satisnet CEO John McCann added: "We are extending our capabilities, allowing us to tackle emerging cyber threats."

These services are initially available to enterprise and public sector customers and will be rolled out to channel partners in the coming months.

Scots firm in strategic buy



Graham Porteous and Andy McKay

ABERDEEN-based Converged's purchase of local firm Aberdeen Technical Services (ATS) has catalysed the formation of a separate company operating under the Converged Group, called Scot-Tech Fire and Security (STFS) which includes all ATS employees.

ATS MD Graham Porteous has stepped back but remains on a consultancy basis.

ATS has operated as an installer and repairer of fire alarms, security, entry, TV, data communication and other electronic systems across north east Scotland for over 25 years.

STFS GM Andy McKay said: "Having worked with ATS for over six years we were familiar with its security systems, client base and long history. This merger gives us an edge through the delivery of security both online and offline."

"As we diversify across new regions and sectors we're investing to exploit the opportunities our integrated approach brings to Internet provision, cybersecurity and now the security of physical premises."

NEWS ROUNDUP

TEKTON Billing has added in-house skills and a partner base following its acquisition of **Zygo Technologies'** business assets. The deal is also expected to aid the streamlining of operations and provide a boost to productivity. Tekton Billing MD Harry McKeever stated: "This marks a pivotal moment for our company."

THE global IT market is set to grow by 3.5% this year, with \$3.4tn, or 70%, coming from the channel, according to Canalys. Its regional growth projections peg EMEA at 3.4% and the sectors poised for expansion include cybersecurity, cloud, software sales and network infrastructure.

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Circulation: info@bpl-business.com
ISSN 1366-5243

bpl. A BPL Business Publication

BPL Limited
The Market House, High Street, Uxbridge, Middlesex UB8 1JN
T: 01895 454 444

Subscriptions
Subscription rates for 12 issues:
UK, £65; Overseas: £80 (incl p&p)
Back issues can be obtained:
UK £6 (incl p&p), Overseas £10 each (incl p&p)
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Resellers urged to bank on payment solutions

RESELLERS who are not embracing real-time payment services are missing out on new revenue opportunities according to early movers in the Payments-as-a-Service (PaaS) space.

"Moving into PaaS has been a great decision for our business," stated Paul Leonard, Director at The Sprint Group.

"Payment solutions and customisable offerings allow us to cater to the particular needs of our clients."

Mark Grice, Head of Customer Success at PaaS provid-

er Fidelity Group, claims that payment services give resellers an edge over competitors as the ever growing challenge to become a centralised supplier becomes more telling.

"Offering payment processing solutions enhances the reseller's value proposition and competitiveness in the market," he commented.

"It also opens up cross-selling opportunities for resellers to capitalise on the growing demand for digital payments and e-commerce services."



Mark Grice

Fidelity Group marched into the payments market late

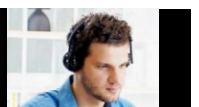
last year after forging agreements with the leading merchant banks and ISO providers, meaning reseller partners like BTT Comms now have access to a payments-in-a-box service via a dedicated portal.

"We have expanded our business and unlocked new revenue streams by moving into PaaS," confirmed BTT Director Shiv Passap.

Fidelity Group Sales Director James Shraga is urging resellers not to miss out on the merchant services market opportunity,

especially in light of the current economic conditions. "Real-time payments are increasingly important for managing liquidity and working capital in all organisations, whatever their size," he commented. "But for the SME sector in particular, cash management is critical."

"For trade and retail customers, being able to perform a 'request to pay' and 'request payment immediately' will become even more important going forward in the ongoing cost of living crisis."



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Hats off to cyber women

ABERDEEN-based Converged Communication Solutions' Nicola McKay and Tiffany Murray have become fully qualified Cyber Essentials Assessors, a field of the IT sector that is still circa 80% male dominated.

"It's high time women were proportionately represented in the cyber industry," stated MD Neil Christie. "There is huge potential for women to leverage their experiences into success within the sector. Nicola and Tiffany were the only females of the 14 students on their respective courses, so this is a significant step forwards and a great achievement for them.

"Investing in Tiffany and Nicola's training and development was an easy decision, allowing us to continue to have all the skills in-house to take clients from initial assessment through to accreditation."



Nicola and Tiffany

FourNet's Ex-Capita catch



Alan Linter

FOURNET has pulled in former Capita Innovations Director Alan Linter as Group Consulting Director.

Linter spent almost 20 years at Capita where he spearheaded a team of innovation leads and solutions directors.

He is credited with delivering the firm's first open AI-based conversational AI solution, and real-time AI-powered agent assist technology.

FourNet CEO Richard Pennington said: "Alan's expertise and background speaks for itself. He's worked across almost every sector and helped to deliver CX transformation for some of the biggest brands. He will help us design, develop

and deliver CX transformation for our customers through our newly created CX function."

Linter has already helped design and launch a shared housing sector service for FourNet which will cut the cost for housing organisations to buy, install, use and manage sector specific AI-powered tools.

Linter commented: "We are a small, dynamic, rapidly growing CX led business taking on the biggest and best providers."

Manchester-based FourNet also has offices in London and Derby, 150 employees and revenues in 2022 of £37m.

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

ANS hails 'inclusive' tech hub

A TECH hub set up in Manchester by MSP ANS includes collaborative working spaces for employees, customers, local firms and communities including charity partners, offering bookable spaces, wellbeing programmes and a joint venture educational programme.

Partners include Manchester Children's Hospital and Manchester's Hide Out Youth Zone.

ANS is also collaborating with schools enabling young people to explore opportunities for careers in technology.

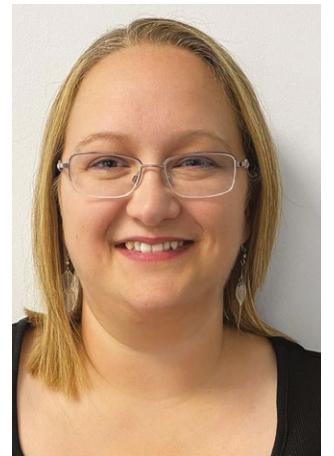
The campus houses ANS's Training Academy and its Apprenticeship Academy which has seen 250 individuals graduate to date. "The tech hub embodies ANS's commitment to inclusivity and accessibility with EDI focus groups involved in the design," stated ANS CEO Richard Thompson.

"Features such as a lower reception desk, hearing aid loops, accessible You Loo bathrooms and prayer rooms ensure that it is welcoming and accommodating to all.

"Our vision is to create a tech movement that empowers individuals, businesses and communities to reach their full potential through technology."

NEWS ROUNDUP

A MODULE that automatically streamlines subscription management for MSPs has been introduced by Inform Billing. "As companies frequently switch subscribers on and off during the month MSPs face the task of accurately billing their clients," stated Clare Lai, Head of Product and Quality Assurance. "The Automated MSP Billing Solution enables MSPs to bill like-for-like in their transactions. The solution can be tailored to various suppliers by supporting product mapping to reduce the need for manual billing interventions, and enables MSPs to manage different pricing levels, for the same product, based on differing contractual commitments. The module also provides a full audit trail."



Clare Lai

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Taking leadership to the

CEOs are well known for being centre stage and leading from the front. Less visible is the Chairperson who runs the board and operates away from the limelight. Here, Gradwell Communications and Comms365 Chairman John Whitty shares insights into how this important role is evolving, and how the Chair's experience and influence can increase the performance of a business and its leadership team.



John Whitty

is important to prospective buyers on exit. Always being prepared to realise the value of the business is key.

How is the Chairperson's role evolving in the ICT channel?

I would like to think that the new Chairperson role is less responsible for governance, although that's still critical, but also willing to contribute and participate in the vision, strategy and execution of the business, especially in areas where some of their experiences are less available in the team. Being prepared to roll up your sleeves and get involved when requested can help tremendously.

The relationship between the CEO and Chair is fundamental to the success of a business, especially where an institutional or financial investor is involved. Being able to understand both the business and shareholder positions and bring the two together is important, especially in the ICT sector where we tend to use a different language than others.

What are the biggest challenges facing ICT channel boardrooms? And what decisions are you prioritising?

The biggest challenge right now is recruiting, training and retaining good people. The sector is growing at such an organic rate that ensuring you are able to meet that growth with new talent, notwithstanding attrition is not an easy task and involves important decisions.

What is the most difficult aspect of being a Chairperson?

Without a doubt its not diving in and trying to fix challenges or lead opportunities personally. The

What was your route into the comms sector? Following 20 years in the Army, providing telecommunications services to the military, I was fortunate enough to join what became Pipex. During the post dotcom bust there were a lot of distressed assets that we managed to consolidate quickly and effectively. Mergers and acquisitions are a passion of mine, especially the identification and negotiation of the deal, and I've been involved in 50-plus transactions over the last 20 years. Most recently I was the MD at GCI and CEO at Solar Communications and Air IT.

What makes a good Chairperson?

I have managed to work with a number of Chairs

over the years and the most useful and effective are those that listen, constructively challenge, guide and mentor. I was lucky enough to have these qualities provided to me in spades by Mike Read at Pipex.

How do you personally impact the strategic growth and development of the businesses you Chair?

My biggest contribution above and beyond the Chairman duties would be knowing how to grow by acquisition and organically in a service company providing technical capability. Knowing when the organisation needs to change direction and structure, bringing in new skills and capabilities for that next step in the journey is sometimes difficult to see when you have existing friendships and loyalty to

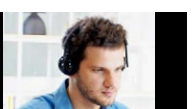
The relationship between the CEO and Chair is fundamental to the success of a business, especially where an institutional or financial investor is involved

those that have grown the business in the early years, but is sometimes necessary to achieve the goals of the owners.

What elements of your prior experience come into play in your current roles as Chairman?

Being part of an energetic and forward thinking team, sharing my experiences and pain endured by taking the wrong decisions at times, all hopefully adds value to

those at the earlier stages of their careers. The ability to share what can be achieved with the right team and right execution plan is extremely rewarding. And being in fast-growing and acquisitive organisations for over 20 years enables me to foresee, in many cases, the opportunities and pitfalls of the decisions that stand before us. It also allows me to understand what elements of the business and its operation



next level

Non-Exec/Exec line is fine but needs to be maintained so that all parties are able to grow and thrive.

How do you advance your own professional development?

By listening to people who have successfully grown their businesses, listening to non-operational experts such as the investor and advisory community given their great analytical skills, and staying in touch with technological advances at conferences and events.

What market trends interest you most?

The consolidation of the market has only just begun. As great businesses are acquired there appears to be new, dynamic and forward thinking start-ups to replace them.

In general, what are today's primary leadership priorities? And what is the key to continued success?

The main leadership priority today is making sure you have the right people that are motivated with an excellent esprit de corps, that are dedicated to deliver the best service to their customers. To remain successful, a business needs to be innovative in its products and propositions, go-to-market strategy and the customer experience offered to clients.

What challenges do you expect to face in the short-term? And what will be the leadership challenges of tomorrow?

The economic situation we currently face has resulted in much stricter investment decision making criteria, which may prevent good gut feel opportunities being taken.

What is the role of the Chairperson in helping boardrooms become more diverse, and businesses become more sustainable in terms of climate change?

Investors, young people and customers are all looking for businesses to set out and achieve their ESG policy. To help with this, the Chair needs to ensure that the business is acting ethically in all areas and should be a standing agenda item for the board. Failing to do so will impact new business, recruitment and investment.

What motivates you most? And in what is your boardroom pet hate?

What motivates me the most is seeing a leadership team develop, mature and benefit from their hard work and determination. I especially dislike bad timekeeping and long rambling emails.

What are your key nuggets of advice to management?

To understand the market, understand your customers' needs, trust your people and then just back yourself to succeed.

Your role model?

Mike Read, my former CEO at Pipex. Mike's management of his people, customers and investors was a joy to watch.

What talent do you wish you had?

To play any musical instrument

What do you fear the most?

Not succeeding or not being ready to retire

What is your main strength and what could you work on to improve?

I like to think I have good emotional intelligence, but my attention to detail could

definitely be improved, as well as my typing skills.

How would you like to be remembered?

As someone with honesty, integrity and loyalty.

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

My network of friends and former colleagues who are always available to bounce ideas off.

Best piece of advice you have been given?

Treat everybody with respect as you'll meet them at least twice on the way up and on the way down!

What possession could you not live without?

Espresso coffee maker.

One example of something you have overcome

I left school at 16 with two grade A CSEs (the GCSE forerunners). I have had to obtain my academic qualifications while holding down challenging roles.

If you weren't in comms what would you be doing?

Something boring and definitely not challenging, probably related to collecting trolleys at supermarkets. ICT is all I have ever known.

What's the biggest risk you have taken?

Leaving a safe and promising career in the Army to join an industry that went into meltdown 12 months afterwards.

How do you relax when not working?

I'm still working on that.

Top tip for business leaders in the comms sector

Get ready for growth and be ready for sale. ■

Energy provision built on trust

BDR Group was founded in 1991 and is an award-winning communications and IT reseller. In 2017, they met Fidelity Energy at Comms Dealer's Margin in Voice & Data event and were immediately impressed upon seeing a demonstration of the portal and services.

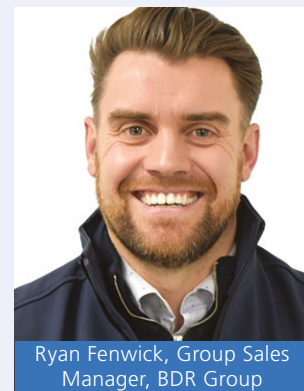
"We have seen substantial growth and have completely transformed from when we first partnered with Fidelity Energy. Originally, we had a headcount of around 50 staff, which has now grown to over 250 employees. In the last couple of years, we have expanded further with acquisitions, including TFM, ACR, Boffins, Integratech, and more," explains Ryan Fenwick, Group Sales Manager.

"That has increased our scope of opportunities, market areas, and customer sizes, offering a huge variety of products. Five years ago, we were a telecommunications company. Now, we offer security, CCTV and IT, as well as energy. It is going from strength to strength."

Early in the partnership with Fidelity Energy, BDR was hugely successful in securing a £3 million green energy contract with one of the largest household names in retail. Ryan explains how the partnership has progressed, "It took a while for everyone to fully grasp the energy offering as it is something completely different from what we are used to discussing with clients. However, the training and ongoing support is excellent. When we were able to help such a large customer, we realised the potential of the partnership and saw the real value. Fidelity Energy went above and beyond to ensure we were supported with every step of the deal, which definitely had a positive effect on building trust with the customer. This success has resulted in contract renegotiation for all of their UK sites, and our long-term partnership continues to grow.

Many of our customers are aware of what is currently happening within the energy market, but they still seek expert advice. The trust built between BDR and Fidelity Energy comes into its own when supporting our customers.

Fidelity Energy has often communicated directly with the customer to answer any questions. This demonstrates to our customers that there is a trusted expert handling their energy and puts them at ease. Many customers have then trusted us to look at other projects where we can assist them, based on their positive experience with energy provision.



Ryan Fenwick, Group Sales Manager, BDR Group

Recently, we had an opportunity for energy provision at a group of schools, but we did not have the background knowledge in education. The Fidelity Energy team went to site visits, met with the customer directly, and acted on behalf of BDR. They used their expertise to handle any questions that we would not have been able to answer and provide the information needed to reassure the customer. This built trust with BDR and even led to referrals to other colleges and schools."

On moving forward and progressing the energy opportunity, Ryan said, "Energy is something we are going to build on. We have had our trial period to see if energy is going to work, and we know how successful it can be in terms of generating revenue, as well as creating or solidifying existing customer relationships. We have promoted a member of staff to Head of Energy and have invested in an energy-dedicated team. We have also been working hard on creating and building a standalone energy website, Switch My Provider. We will look to target BDR customers and new customers, redirecting them to the website where they can fill in a form or upload their bill and even get a quote on installing a Voltage Optimisation unit.

The next steps will be to start delivering more marketing campaigns to potential new clients and sending out energy reports to our existing base. It is a fantastic product for our salespeople, as historically the lead time is around three to six months. However, with energy, you can achieve some quick wins.

The Fidelity Energy offering has been worth the time we invested, and they are now one of our key partners. They are a great group of people to work with, and it is a highly profitable product.

With energy being such a hot topic now, our customers are interested in engaging with people who know what they are talking about and can be trusted to offer them honest support and advice."

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The Big Goal nets Danny

Danny Simpson, who lifted the Premier League title with Leicester City in 2015-16, will be one of the special guests at the launch of The Big Goal at St George's Park, the Home of England Football, on October 4th. The Manchester-born right back, who made 30 league appearances for the Foxes during that title winning year, is an ambassador for The Street Soccer Foundation which has founded The Big Goal initiative alongside headline sponsor Giacom and media partner Comms Dealer.



Danny Simpson and Keith Mabbutt

At The Big Goal launch, Simpson will explain some of the challenges he has faced in his life and underline the importance of The Street Soccer Foundation, which uses football as a catalyst to help change the lives of disadvantaged young people via the Academies it runs across the UK. "Danny Simpson is an inspiration to the young people who sign up to

our Academies and knows everything about beating the odds in sport and life," said Street Soccer Foundation Founder and CEO Keith Mabbutt. "We are delighted he'll be one of our guests at St George's Park to help us explain the value of The Big Goal and what it means to ICT companies

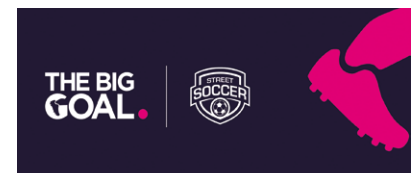
taking part and the disadvantaged young people it will help."

The project will give ICT industry teams the chance to play in regional five-a-side football tournaments to take place at Premier League and EFL venues nationwide in the spring

next year. This will culminate in a national finals day to be staged at St George's Park next summer.

Importantly, every channel team that commits to paying the entry fee will become a sponsor of a Street Soccer Foundation Academy within their area. Competing in the tournament is not a prerequisite of The Big Goal and companies can simply sponsor an Academy, if preferred. ■

Industry leaders wishing to learn more should register for the launch at the home of England football on October 4th without delay as places will be limited. Register at <https://giacom.com/events/the-big-goal>



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Automating Success

Avoid the PSTN switch-off with TalkTalk Wholesale Services MPF technology

Neil Wilson, Product Strategy Director, TalkTalk Wholesale Services

The WLR withdrawal is driving a cliff edge across the industry, calling for businesses to move their voice services to SoGEA or to FTTP immediately. However, TalkTalk Wholesale Services has spoken out, announcing another, much simpler route to take on the journey to full fibre.

Here, Product Strategy Director, Neil Wilson, reinforces this message and explains the business implications of moving to SoGEA, compared with switching to their unique MPF solution to host voice services and bridge the gap between PSTN and FTTP.

Neil, what is TalkTalk's message around the PSTN switch-off?

While consensus in the industry is for businesses to move services away from PSTN or WLR lines, to full fibre or all IP services, and align with the WLR switch off taking place in December 2025, our message is that there are other options available to alleviate the pressure of these timelines that can actually provide more benefits to businesses.

Two years is a short window to transition services to a new product, particularly considering the infrastructure shift required to do so. Not to mention the cost implications of switching your technology. However, SoGEA forces businesses to migrate to an all-IP voice world imminently,

whether they're ready to or not. Then, when FTTP becomes available later, they will be required to make another complex and costly infrastructure change if they haven't done so already.

While all businesses will need to move to an all-IP world eventually, the move to SoGEA forces that conversation onto customers that aren't always ready for it, or the cost implications it brings.

The process is also not as simple as switching existing lines like WLR, ADSL2+ / SMPF and WLR FTTC to SoGEA and getting the same bandwidth, at the same cost. While businesses can move to a bandwidth-equivalent product, those currently using services such as voice, alarms and EPOS on FTTC lines will need to audit the equipment and determine whether it's suitable to move to an IP voice platform. This isn't always straightforward because the equipment isn't always owned by the reseller. Where it isn't, the reseller will need to ask each end customer and, if equipment isn't suitable, that



Neil Wilson

customer will have to find more budget to upgrade their services. Unfortunately, many businesses running on these existing lines are often doing so with legacy infrastructure that will need replacing at a cost. What's more, in the cases of WLR and SMPF, even where equipment is suitable, there will still be a cost to switch – a tough prospect for businesses in the current economic climate.

Therefore, our message to customers is that switching to MPF technology to continue to use analogue services is another extremely viable option, that avoids the WLR switch-off and provides more flexibility as we wait for FTTP availability to increase.

MPF is copper based but has a much longer shelf life and, given the rollout plans for FTTP, can act as an effective middleman for businesses waiting for full fibre, as a cost-effective alternative to SoGEA.

work and effort involved to understand the wider technology landscape and with this comes risk to the service provided by resellers. MPF doesn't require that effort. It maintains the status quo for a partner and an end customer with a more strategic, less time pressured conversation about where they want to go and the technology they want to use.

Partners will still have to make the switch to FTTP at some point. That's a non-negotiable. However, by switching to our MPF services, we can help partners make the change directly to FTTP when it's available.

How TalkTalk is supporting businesses on their FTTP journey

When our customers are ready to migrate to FTTP, we want to support them by giving them the broadest choice we can. We'll do this through teaming up with a range of suppliers and letting partners reap the benefits of choice through us. Rather than having to stitch together altnets within their own portfolios to get the coverage they want.

The aim of our full fibre strategy is to align with the right altnets to be able to provide the best coverage to our partners and facilitate that full fibre migration in future.

Relax, the PSTN pressure's off

TalkTalk have 15 years' experience delivering MPF. With us you can provide an effective alternative to rushing customers into complex and costly post-PSTN migrations.

STRESSED ABOUT THE PSTN SWITCH-OFF?

If only there was another way. Oh wait, there is...

wholesale.talktalk.co.uk/ttws-mpf →

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And post stop-sell and switch-off, new MPF lines and migrations can continue to be added to our network as before.

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wholesale.talktalk.co.uk/ttws-mpf



Prime time for Mitel

Mitel's ambition for innovation and global growth is stronger than ever as the pioneering vendor turns 50, says Head of UK & Ireland Nick Riggott.

Fifty years ago Sir Terry Matthews and Michael Cowpland founded Ottawa-based Mitel as a developer of printed circuit boards for telephone switches and introduced what was said to be the first software driven PBX. Mitel also blazed a trail for computer telephony integration including work on the Universal Serial Bus (USB) specification during the 1990s. The company went on to virtualise UC through a partnership with VMware, which was hailed as an industry first.

With a strong reputation for innovation the business evolved and grew as a UC vendor that serves more than 75 million users in over 100 countries having acquired rival Unify (the UC&C business of Atos) in January this year to cement its commanding position. The deal has almost reached completion and delivers Unify's voice platforms, collaboration and contact centre products, plus device and endpoint portfolio.

It also boosts Mitel's global channel partner base to over 5,500. "The complementary strengths of Mitel's mid-market expertise and Unify's enterprise managed services business provides

a competitive option for mid-to-large enterprise organisations," said Riggott.

"This ultimately means that the combined company would have the operational scale, portfolio, geographic reach, go-to-market resources and financial profile to modernise the UC experience for customers faster and more effectively. Mitel will also offer more global resources to support the overall partner experience while strengthening and growing our partner network."

Riggott noted that Mitel has set its sights on further raising its game by prioritising the development of employees, the partner programme and driving product innovation forward around the Customer Lifecycle Management (CLM) programme. "Last year Mitel launched its enhanced Global Partner Programme which puts a focus on CLM," stated Riggott. "CLM has risen in interest because of the shift in how we work and the requirements of UC. It helps organisations link their goals with the UC technology they're adopting or upgrading."

Mitel's technology focus is broad, ranging from IP



Nick Riggott

The past two years have shown us that it pays to be flexible and prepared for extraordinary circumstances

desktop phones designed for hybrid working to integrating next generation technologies into business processes through open APIs, and the vendor caters for all delivery mechanisms whether on-premise, cloud or hybrid deployment models. Mitel has also introduced vertical specialisations.

Key focus

Another strategic focus is to deepen its play across Microsoft Teams, and Riggott's big ambition is to elevate the vendor as the top choice for customers across any vertical looking to optimise their Microsoft Teams investment and experience.

All of this demands flexibility and according to Riggott being agile should be at the forefront of all channel leaders' minds. "The past two years have shown us that it pays to be flexible and prepared for extraordinary circumstances," he stated. "And the UK market is moving at great pace – there is no choice but to keep up or lose share."

One particularly fast evolving technology that interests Riggott is generative AI which he tips as being a game changer across all industries including the UC space. "Organisations need to be prepared to integrate these tools into their day-

to-day work practices while keeping the value of staff front of mind," he stated.

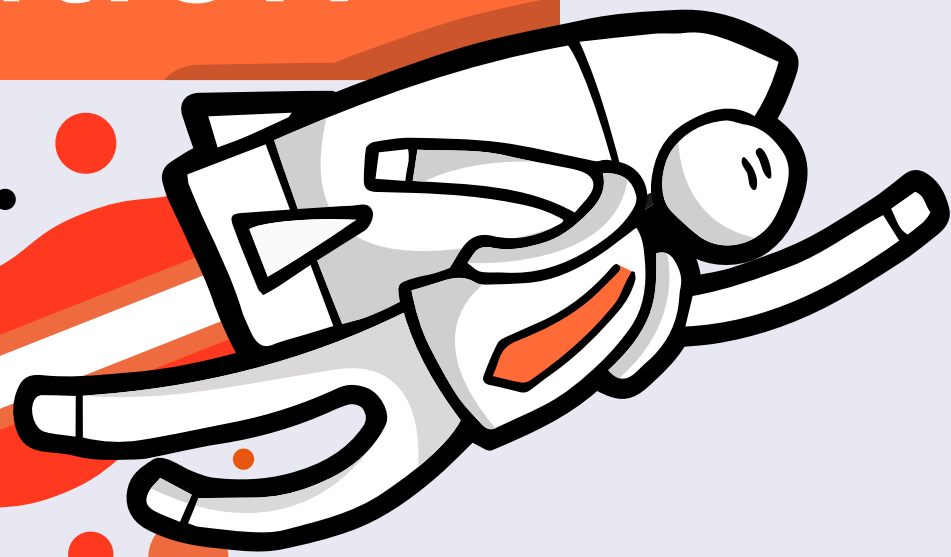
Having experienced the pandemic, those IT bosses charged with maximising investment in technology are more likely to be receptive to the benefits of such solutions and drive demand, believes Riggott. "We all shifted to hybrid working when the circumstances demanded it," he added. "But two years on we are seeing customers focus more on the solutions that meet business needs, and they are determining ROI a lot earlier in the cycle as opposed to being led by perceptions of the technology available to them." ■





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Burland on B Corp status

Weston-super-Mare based First Class Comms reached a milestone in July, achieving B Corp status which Managing Director and founder Mark Burland says is a first for the UK reseller community. To help peers open their own doorway to positive change, he shares insights into what it takes to become a B Corp, and shows why he thinks smaller businesses could have an edge in the process.

Membership of the B Corp community was something we were keen to achieve. Not just because, like everyone, we care about the impact our work has on our staff and communities, but because it also means we can continue to improve our business practices and make us the best we can be. It's taken a year of hard work but it's a badge of honour for us to have achieved the gold standard in business sustainability.

Lots of companies greenwash their operations, ticking the boxes necessary to help them appear that they're a force for good. But for us, the B Corp assessment is so thorough that it means that First Class Comms, as the first telecoms reseller in the UK to achieve the status, can

stand as an example in our industry for others to follow.

The process of applying and submitting for B Corp was onerous, not only the process itself but also the work we had to do in readying our business to make sure our application was successful. The B Corp accreditation requires a deep dive into every aspect of your organisation, from how you treat your customers and staff to your commitment to supporting your community and the environment.

It's worth noting that not every business will score highly in every category of the B Corp assessment. However, part of our reason for doing this was so that we could identify areas in which we were strong and other areas in which we could continue to improve.



Mark Burland

It has taken a year of hard work but it's a badge of honour for us to have achieved the gold standard in business sustainability

Fortunately, we were able to deploy a member of staff, our business analyst Steve Payne, to take on responsibility for the application. He worked closely with an external sustainability consultant to help guide us through the process.

Essentially, we were required to submit information

about five key categories of our business model and operations – governance, employment, community work, environment and customer service. Each was evaluated for how the business is set up to make a positive impact, with points allocated to each area. We were pleased to achieve a score of 89.3 in our overall

B Impact score, well above the mark of 80 needed to become B Corp accredited. As an illustration, the median score for ordinary businesses taking the assessment is 50.9.

Small businesses like ours looking to join the B Corp community are at the same time at an advantage
Continued on page 18

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Continued from page 16 and a disadvantage. In some ways it's easier, because smaller companies have less to analyse, are closer to the action and leaders are more likely to be involved in a broad spectrum of the various facets of the company. Indeed, that's why we believe strongly that the future of ethical business will be led by smaller companies that are flexible enough to pioneer in good practices and set examples for others to

Our industry needs to adopt a new approach to CSR practices, with a holistic appraisal of every aspect of how a business is run

follow. We're proof of that through this accreditation.

Resource challenge

However, the challenge for smaller firms is to find the resources available to undertake the process of deep analysis and reporting. I've mentioned Steve's work already and we have been fortunate to enjoy another profitable year despite his deployment to this task. I'd suggest that company owners make sure that they can genuinely commit to the process, and that it doesn't suck too much oxygen out of the daily running of the company. We also decided to enlist the support of a consultant to steer us in the right direction.

My other piece of advice would be to treat the process with the respect it deserves. Achieving B Corp status isn't something you can just do through the application process itself. It demands sustainable business practices to be

genuinely embedded through the company. You need to have put the work in before starting your application.

Our industry needs to adopt a new approach to CSR practices, with a holistic appraisal of every aspect of how a business is run. For me, it's not up to the regulator to drive change in helping telcos to become more sustainable businesses, whether that's in respect of their employment practices or their approach to environmental issues. Change needs to come from the bottom up, by companies recognising the benefits of greater sustainability and by encouraging each other to do better. That's why we have worked to achieve B Corp status, not because we were told to do it, but because it was the right thing to do.

Sustainability is a broad area and it can take a great deal of investment in time and finances to implement schemes throughout a business, particular for larger firms. However, there are some quick wins which all companies can achieve relatively easily. A good start would be to share those experiences, providing a collective foundation which we can build on together.

The great thing about B Corp is that it offers a standardised model by which various aspects of sustainability can be measured and scored. So you can see exactly where a business is doing well – across its employment, customer services, environmental approach, governance and community outreach – and where it's falling short. Adoption of a standardised assessment model for telcos would help companies work out where they are, see how the industry leaders are doing better, and discover how they can improve. ■

Pillow opens door to one-stop-shop for channel firms

Voip Unlimited Managing Director Mark Pillow's strategy to become a one-stop-shop for the comms channel has delivered strong results following the roll out of an end-to-end solution early this year. "The goal was to create an environment where all aspects of business coverage is in a single, easily accessible space, streamlining operations and optimising efficiency," stated Pillow. "A prime example of this approach is the launch in January of our latest UCaaS platform, Voxone, which seamlessly integrates with all business operations.

"We aim to push the boundaries of delivering voice services to the channel, exploring new connectivity alternatives and delivering a UC solution that supports clients as they transition from small customer support teams into broader contact centre operations."

Voip Unlimited was established in 2006 and has served the channel for 17 years with an evolving focus on becoming a one-stop-shop for partners. Its growth trajectory is reflected in a headcount rise to 42 this year, 16 per cent growth in the number of calls sent over its network and an 18 per cent uplift in the number of solutions provided. Pillow attributed much of this growth to helping companies remove complexity from their transition to digital and rolling out the UCaaS



Mark Pillow

and CCaaS solution. He said the launch is also reflective of Voip Unlimited's product development roadmap and focus on integrated communications. Also blipping large on Pillow's radar screen is the market potential for mobile voice and data.

Opportunities

Pillow is just as mindful of long-term opportunities around software, integration and automation. And the market trends that interest him most right now include the push for flexibility with businesses increasingly demanding tailored solutions including customisable options within VoIP offerings that allow them to configure their comms tools as they see fit. "The global shift towards hybrid working models is also driving businesses to find robust comms solutions," added Pillow.

As the driving force behind Voip Unlimited, Pillow plays a pivotal leadership role in the company's growth and development. His impact is

manifested in several key areas, such as ensuring the availability of the right resources, understanding the needs of partners and customers, fostering innovation and providing a stable infrastructure for the firm's operations. All of which means Pillow needs to balance competing priorities to achieve his goals.

"Large scale development projects require significant investments in terms of time, resources and planning," he stated. "Additionally, ongoing development needs, such as enhancements to existing products and security updates, require continuous attention. To strike the right balance our priorities are assessed based on their immediate impact on business goals and partner-customer needs. The company remains flexible, ready to pivot its priorities based on market dynamics, customer feedback and emerging technologies."

Other decisions being prioritised by Pillow include innovation, team development and talent acquisition, along with being flexible in commercials to ensure mutual growth with partners. "In terms of long-term opportunities, Voip Unlimited is strategically directing resources toward software, integration and automation," reiterated Pillow. "This approach not only streamlines operations but also ensures that the company remains at the forefront of innovation." ■

Going GREEN can really get businesses going, after all, Green is for GO...

Bold statements like – “Saving the planet”, “Saving Humanity” and “protecting our world for our future generations” all sound great, but are we really doing something about it?

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It's not just a force for global good, it's a commercial differentiator that marks an enterprise out as culturally aware and socially responsible.

In many cases, enterprises must prove their green credentials to win new business, including demonstrating that they partner with other organisations that share the same commitment to sustainability.

Indeed, recent research found that 50% of B2B buyers are consciously aware of an organisation's social and environmental performance and see it as a reason to do business with them.

Of course, technology in and of itself is a huge contributor to the reduction in global carbon emissions. Virtual desktops, unified communication tools, remote collaboration, and physical space-saving cloud migration are all contributing enormously to reduced emissions from travel and energy consumption,



Green IP's electric fleet help deliver sustainable solutions.

however businesses need to make the change and adopt this new technology, businesses need to act now.

Welcome to Green IP – We are a hosted Unified Communications provider working with our customers enabling technology to reduce their carbon footprint. Our customers are working more efficiently by collaborating with their customers/suppliers and colleagues so they can start their sustainable journey. At Green IP we are working with Climate Partner www.climatepartner.com/en to ensure everything

we do is Sustainable with the aim to become a Net Carbon business. We deliver Sustainable solutions with the aim to reduce carbon to our customers and to help them become Sustainable, whilst saving costs and improving collaboration by adopting a “Work Anywhere” approach. Our solutions can be delivered globally thus reducing travel costs and Co2 whilst increasing productivity and offering a global reach. We also help our customers go further by introducing them to Climate Partner as a low-cost entry point to start their own sustainable journey.

We are only just getting started but it already feels like we are making a difference and with your help with we can do even more.

For any size of business, the opportunities to turn a strategic sustainability strategy into a win-win for both you and your customers everywhere. Getting started is often the hardest part of the journey – but the rewards can be truly transformational.

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Talent gap hinders push f

Catalysing the link between talent and innovation is a major objective for the ICT sector but ongoing skills shortages have created barriers against achieving this critical interconnected goal. Here, Colt Technology Services CEO Keri Gilder explores how channel leaders can tackle what is perhaps the biggest challenge facing ICT businesses, and how nurturing a more diverse and inclusive workforce could create the conditions to encourage greater innovation.



Keri Gilder

I participated in a recent round table organised by EY and attended by Deputy Prime Minister Rt Hon Oliver Dowden MP to discuss topics such as digital inclusion, the UK's future technology roadmap and the urgent requirement to build sustainable infrastructure and talent for the country to lead in AI and quantum. I was struck by the passion and determination of everyone present to make the UK a technological superpower. One of the key areas our discussion centred around is an ambition to build and promote the UK as a world leader in this area. The need for investment in growth and skills in quantum is

fundamental to achieving this goal and will present exciting opportunities for the channel. Acknowledging and investing in the skills gap is a critical first step.

We've reached a pivotal point in the narrative around the skills shortage... 77 per cent of CEOs see the limited availability of key skills as the biggest business threat to company growth. Businesses are worried, with those in the tech industry perhaps the most concerned of all. Tech must accelerate – and deliver – the roadmap for the digital economy, a roadmap to facilitate a connected global society, built on innovation. At the same time,

It has never been more important, morally or economically, to create a fair and equitable workplace where everyone can thrive. We must take action to remove bias

the industry shoulders the responsibility to drive this transition in a sustainable, fair and equitable way. Digital infrastructure is a priority, and ESG credentials top the agenda, but these

plans are at serious risk of derailment by one critical factor – access to talent.

For the past three years I've been open with my concerns about the talent

shortage reaching crisis point, particularly across the tech industry, and the long-term impact this will have on innovation, industry, society and the economy. Demand outstrips



for innovation

supply and skills are just not growing at the same pace as disruptive tech. Businesses won't be able to innovate or compete. They will be unable to deliver what they need to in order to grow. One study found 84 per cent of businesses questioned are being held back from delivering major cloud projects due to a lack of

We must start by bridging the gap between what companies have to offer, and what job seekers actually want

skilled tech talent to support their goals, while just one in ten workers have the skills in AI that are in-demand, according to Salesforce.

It isn't just tech talent that's in demand: Nearly 80 per cent of CEOs say they are struggling to find the innovation and creativity skills they need for their businesses. Which leads to the obvious question – why are they finding it so hard? The post-Covid Great Resignation and boom in hybrid roles should have opened up the market to a pool of talent unconstrained by geographic borders. But this hasn't happened at the pace we expected. Some leaders are still readjusting, unfamiliar and uncomfortable with new working models. Some organisations are still not set up operationally to deliver a remote employee experience that replicates a traditional workplace experience. Businesses that had built strong cultures

based on being present in a traditional workplace were forced to rethink what mattered most.

In hiring for the tech channel, we must start by bridging the gap between what companies have to offer, and what job seekers actually want. Despite the wave of excitement the tech industry

continues to ride – buoyed by the AI and metaverse buzz – job seekers need more than promises of flashy offices with beanbags before they commit to a role. Today's candidates actively search for businesses whose values

align with their own. They seek businesses where difference is celebrated, where commitments to diversity, equity and inclusion are not just goals but are part of an organisation's DNA.

LinkedIn found that 59 per cent of respondents in Europe wouldn't work for an organisation that did not share their values. A Glassdoor study indicates that 32 per cent of job seekers would not apply for a job at a business they felt didn't show a commitment to diversity and inclusion. Diverse companies are proven to outperform others, to deliver a better customer experience and see greater levels of innovation. Employees are more engaged and retention levels are higher.

Narrowing the skills gap must reach far wider than the hiring stage. Stopping talent leaving the industry is a huge challenge. People

with disabilities report being shut out of the industry, facing barriers to successfully delivering their roles from physical accessibility to a lack of access to supportive technologies. Meanwhile, 60 per cent of women in tech have considered leaving the industry; 35 per cent of workers feel too old for the industry and 71 per cent of young people in tech say their gender, ethnicity, socio-economic background or neurodiversity has made them feel uncomfortable at work. Unless we address these issues head-on and commit to change – to removing barriers to progress – the stark truth is, we're not going to reduce the skills gap in our lifetime, or even for our children's generation.

It has never been more important, morally or economically, to create a fair and equitable workplace where everyone can thrive. We must take action to remove bias, set goals and report progress, invest in internal mobility and commit to a culture of learning. Change starts at the top, and we have to create leadership teams reflective of broader society. We need greater collaboration across the industry, we must forge deeper connections between government, education and business, and we must deliver against our duty of care, to support and nurture our employees at every stage of their career.

We're on the cusp of a new digital age which presents an incredible opportunity. Right now, the onus falls on tech leaders, government and educators to come together to build the skilled, diverse and equitable workforce of the future. ■

How To Take The Right Road For A Successful UC Journey

It's no secret. ICT leaders are under pressure – now more so than ever in an increasingly dynamic, fluent and competitive workplace.

Cutting costs, consolidating tools, ensuring 100% availability, supporting hybrid deployments and maintaining compliance are some of the many challenges.

To compound matters further, choosing a unified communications platform is generally harder than it was pre-pandemic. There's always a new product, service or system that claims to future-proof cloud infrastructure.

There's little doubt businesses are facing fiercer competition than ever, with 90% indicating their industry has become more competitive over the last five years, according to some of the latest research.

And, despite the emergence of omnichannel buying trends, the value of 'voice' has never been greater with 71% of customer conversations still happening over the phone.

So choosing the right road for their UC journey is critical for overall business success.

We find the most successful technology leaders simplify the overall process by starting their conversations with business outcomes instead of 'which tools should we buy'.

The end-result will be based on use cases that fit the unique roles within their organisation vs. a "one-size fits none" solution. Not to mention the time and headache of false starts and wasting time going down a rabbit hole.

More and more, IT leaders are crystalizing cloud communications and collaboration priorities based on this approach.

Here's the most common UC as a Service use cases we're seeing:

- Increased business agility – to support hybrid deployments, traditional telephony requirements and futureproof the way they work.

- Ability to unify technology silos – by ensuring the voice, contact centre and collaboration platforms are seamlessly integrated with each other.
- Better support and service – driven by high availability, improved call quality and performance, all while responding proactively when needed.
- Reduced hardware administration and a predictable costs model – to free themselves from the hassle of managing multiple vendors/bills and maintaining on-premises equipment.
- Enhanced productivity - save time spent contact switching between apps and devices to work on projects that matter.

According to Gartner, global UCaaS spending will grow to reach \$50.4 billion in 2025.

Implementing a unified communication and collaboration solution involves not only trusting a qualified vendor, but also investing time, money, and work to ensure a strong relationship.

Gartner says by 2024, 80% of organisations will prioritise collaboration and meeting platforms over telephony when defining unified communications portfolio strategy, up from 30% in 2019.

The best way forward is to identify a company's current collaboration solution and determine their goals and requirements. If an organisation doesn't know what type of strategy fits in with its business goals, a UCaaS solution is unlikely to be effective.

Microsoft Teams and Cisco Webex have become the centre of the employee experience. Evolve IP offers both solutions simultaneously: Microsoft Teams Direct Routing and Evolve Anywhere with Webex. So businesses can choose the solution that best fits their current strategy.

To learn more about how Evolve IP can help your customers' businesses maximize the benefits of UCaaS in an ever evolving world, visit www.evolveip.uk

Fostering female talent f

Giacom is an organisation that leads with providing equal opportunities for its people and its focus on inclusion leverages the full benefits of female potential, according to Chief People Officer Hayley Duckmanton. Here, she shares insights into an organisational culture that will help you double down on your diversity and leadership initiatives.

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

I've worked in the channel for close to 20 years and am fortunate to have never personally been a victim of direct sexism in the workplace. I'm also grateful to have a solid executive team around me that have zero tolerance for discrimination or derogatory comments of any kind towards women or anyone else.

My experience and opinion is that unconscious gender bias still exists in the channel (and the world in general), but awareness of this, and the courage to challenge it has improved measurably over the years. In my experience, merely calling it out can quickly and effectively address or resolve the problem. There

is very often no ill intention. I am optimistic that with increased awareness, that my own experience will soon be the norm for all women in the channel.

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

As Chief People Officer I've worked hard to ensure that the board selection process is transparent and inclusive, helping to avoid any biases that might prevent qualified female candidates from being considered. Commitment to diversity and inclusion has to come from the top so our board never misses an opportunity to highlight the success stories of female leaders within the organisation.

A recent example is our Group Head of Operational Service, Emma Harvey, who recently won an award for



Hayley Duckmanton

Equivalence of opportunity has to be the goal, making every industry and every career path accessible to people from all backgrounds and all walks of life

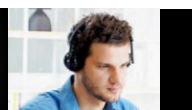
her amazing work. These stories can inspire other women to pursue leadership roles and showcase the benefits of diversity.

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

When diversity and inclusion are embedded in a company's values it becomes easier to achieve diversity on the board. It's also important

that women are fairly represented in management positions across all levels of the business, ensuring that there's a strong pipeline of women leaders who are ready to take on senior positions when the time is right. Implementing flexible work policies that allow for better work-life balance can also encourage women to pursue leadership roles. We've introduced flexible

working arrangements that accommodate the needs of both male and female employees. This helps us to retain female talent and prevent them from dropping out of the leadership pipeline due to work-life balance challenges. For example, we offer a generous maternity package which helps our women to progress their careers in addition to having families.



For the top jobs

What barriers have you identified to having more women on boards?

Unfortunately, there's no one size fits all solution to the challenge of female representation. Barriers and solutions can vary based on the business, industry and region. I am also open minded to the opposite challenge occurring in different industries where female representation will be greater than male.

Giacom establishes clear criteria and skills required for board positions so the assessment of candidates is focused on qualifications rather than assumptions. We've also introduced checks and balances that ensure our selection process is transparent and accountable. It's important to focus on employing the right person for the job and that diversity doesn't become a tick in the box. It is, however, quite often the case that women face greater challenges when it comes to balancing family responsibilities with board commitments. To equalise this imbalance Giacom has implemented family friendly policies such as flexible working hours and enhanced parental leave.

What cultural considerations must be taken into account?

Creating an inclusive and supportive company culture that values diversity of all kinds is key. This cultivates a welcoming environment where people feel free to be themselves which, in turn, helps to attract and retain female talent and encourages them to aspire to leadership roles. Keeping things simple is also key. The technology industry can be full of jargon, leading to the simple becoming needlessly

Don't be afraid to take on leadership roles within projects, even if they're not part of your job

complex, thus putting some people off. You don't have to be the cleverest in the room to be a brilliant leader. Very often the opposite is more effective, so embracing a straight talking culture also cultivates diversity. Being clear that many leadership skills are transferable from industry to industry will also attract successful female talent from industries where they are better represented.

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

Having a wide reaching professional network will help enormously, so regularly attend industry events and join professional associations relevant to your skill set. Don't be afraid to take on leadership roles within projects, even if they're not part of your job description as these provide great opportunities to showcase your leadership qualities, strategic thinking and ability to make decisions. These also provide opportunities to seek feedback on your performance and leadership style, enabling you to adjust your approach and continuously improve.

The importance of balancing your work and personal life can never be overstated.

It's crucial to maintaining your energy and focus over the long term, so take all necessary steps to cultivate a healthy work-life balance. Finally, don't over think it. Just be you! Authenticity is an integral trait of any brilliant leader. If you find that you're facing a challenge getting appropriate recognition and opportunities within your company due to your gender, then it is not the right company for you. The channel provides an abundance of diverse opportunities to thrive and there will be a greater fit out there.

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

There's noticeably more women in leadership positions now than when I started my career in the channel. It's definitely not split down the middle and there's still a lot of work to be done but, by and large, the channel seems to have a much broader demographic across all levels of leadership.

Equivalence of opportunity has to be the goal, making every industry and every career path accessible to people from all backgrounds and all walks of life. But, when striving for diversity it's important to remember that applicants' preferences and choices play a part in the outcome. Due to societal and cultural factors, some careers and fields continue to hold more or less appeal to the different genders. The reasons why are complex and a completely different rabbit hole to go down but, by making the technology industry feel more welcoming, inclusive and accessible, we'll eventually achieve a balance. ■

The Leasing Edge

Brought to you by



Is leasing still viable amongst rising interest rates?

The Bank of England recently increased its base rate again to 5.25%, the highest level since 2007. This decision has a direct impact on the cost of borrowing and saving money in the UK, affecting various sectors of the economy, including the asset finance and leasing industry. As interest rates rise, leasing becomes more expensive for both providers and consequently customers, which may discourage some businesses from investing in new equipment or technology via a finance option. But is that enough reason for customers to be automatically deterred from leasing?



Dan MacKrell

Vendors/resellers can either quote monthly/quarterly payments based on the order value, or they can work backwards to find out how much customers can afford to spend on a solution by entering their desired monthly payment amount instead, ensuring they find an option to match their budget.

Despite the rising interest rates, Shire Leasing have produced some of their record months on volume this year. In this article, I'll explain why leasing is still a viable and beneficial option for many UK SMEs and how vendors/resellers can overcome some of the challenges posed when offering finance options.

Most people are aware that leasing allows businesses to maximise their cash reserves. This can be especially helpful in times of economic uncertainty or volatility, when cash flow is crucial for survival and growth. Of course, the flipside is that increased interest rates affect the total cost customers pay for a solution. Nonetheless, monthly payments are often far more flexible and attainable than the capital outlay required for outright cash purchases. The comparable differences in interest hikes when spread over the term of an agreement are often marginal too. So leasing remains a favourable option to access the latest technologies affordably for businesses keen to preserve cash and grow.

By leasing IT and comms solutions, businesses can fix their payments for an agreed term and in economic uncertainty, it allows them to hedge against any further inflation that may occur too. By preserving cash, customers could even potentially benefit from the improved savings rates available, making their cash work harder in the bank as they spread their costs through a lease.

By breaking down the cost of leasing into monthly, weekly or even daily equivalents, customers can see how little they actually pay for accessing the latest assets they need. For example, using Shire Online, you can calculate and explain to a customer that leasing a £3,000 solution consisting of hardware, cabling and software licenses could cost them less than £5 per day (excluding VAT), or less than the coffee and breakfast you might pick up on the way to work. This way, customers can realise the value of leasing and compare it with other alternatives. When investing in technology for your business, it often generates revenue or offers savings in efficiencies, or both – when monetised the lease payment can be significantly lower than the cash benefit of the technology.

Changes to interest can make it daunting to offer finance options, so it's important to work with a reliable partner who can confidently and knowledgeably address and overcome customer queries. By removing the focus of interest and focusing on the core benefits, channel vendors and resellers can continue to improve sales conversions and customer satisfaction by offering lease options.

To learn more, contact Shire Leasing's Dan MacKrell on 07484 116930, or visit www.shireleasing.co.uk/commsdealer.

Tailoring a solution on a lease is made simple through advanced online tools, such as Shire Online.

To advertise in **comms** dealer
contact The Sales Team on 07759 731134

Neil McArthur: The story

Freedom Fibre CEO Neil McArthur MBE brings together his own remarkable career story with clear analysis of how the UK full fibre market is shaping up – and while shedding light on these important industry issues he shares insights into a more personal achievement that is close to his heart.

The name Neil McArthur has become famously synonymous with entrepreneurialism in the telco space, but perhaps surprisingly he identifies himself more as an engineer, based on his electrical engineering background and the influence of his father who worked in the steel industry. In fact, McArthur was an apprentice with British Nuclear Fuels before entering the telecoms sector in the mid-1990s when deregulation took place, setting up Opal Telecoms. From the outset, Opal was a relatively small B2B player in the days of voice and pre-dated broadband.

Opal Telecom merged with Carphone Warehouse in 2002 to access more capital and this propitious deal established the foundations of TalkTalk. "We entered the broadband market and built what we termed 'the next generation network' which made use of metallic path facilities (MPF)," stated McArthur. "This allowed us to offer voice and data over a converged network that we rolled out across the UK to over four million customers, which at that time represented 18 per cent of the market."

The business demerged from Carphone Warehouse in 2010 and developed into a consumer and B2B provider,

namely the high profile brand that TalkTalk is today. McArthur ran the technology side of TalkTalk for eight years and was a non-executive director. He then ran Fibre Nation, a direct trenching FTTP venture based in York which was sold to CityFibre for over £200 million. Following the handover, McArthur and his executive team set up Freedom Fibre to bring full fibre broadband to rural and hard-to-reach areas. That was less than three years ago and since launch McArthur has leveraged the full gamut of his experience.

"Having seen first hand the technological advancement and growth during my time with TalkTalk, when fibre finally matured we were able to hit the ground running and start building full fibre networks," added McArthur. "Initially, the project was about finding out how we could effectively and economically build full fibre networks and over a three year period we evolved sophisticated models using passive infrastructure access to avoid the disruption caused by new network build."

The company (which currently has a 200-plus headcount) is based in Irlam, Greater Manchester, with its build area stretching from Greater Manchester down to Shropshire and into north Wales. Across its north west



Neil McArthur

Divergence has its limits and in time we need to converge and ultimately consolidate the industry. There are well over 100 altnets in the UK and that's not sustainable

heartland Freedom Fibre has accrued over 100,000 premises passed and is on track to expand to over 150,000 properties through 2023 as part of its ambition to achieve a contiguous network serving two million properties, including 70,000 contracted for north Shropshire through a recently

won Project Gigabit Scheme. But none of these successes have come easily. "Trying to establish a new telecoms company, especially in something as capital intensive and engineering intensive as fibre, and achieve excellence, is immensely difficult," explained McArthur. "So the obvious approach for us was

to focus on what we know best, the engineering."

Engineering pedigree

As an engineer, McArthur's main focus has always been the effective deployment of capital within telecoms markets. "I know from my 20 years at TalkTalk it's difficult to run an engineering-

of a comms sector giant

model and execution in May 2022 when it raised £100 million through a £16 million Santander Bank debt facility, and an £84 million investment from infrastructure investor Equitix. To date Freedom Fibre has secured over £111 million of funding including a small injection from TalkTalk. "We're already in conversations to increase this capital to expand our build footprint," noted McArthur.

Overall, the altnet community and its investors have raised circa £17 billion to play their part in the UK FTTP roll out, which should see the UK well on the way to full fibre coverage by 2030. McArthur also noted that to achieve full fibre coverage across the UK, the Treasury has only had to contribute £5 billion (to subsidise the hardest 20 per cent). "Given the economic value that delivers for the economy, let alone the positive impact on the environment, that is a huge win for the nation," stated McArthur. "Some altnets are urban focused, others are rural, some are retail ISPs and some wholesale only. The divergence of this enterprising industry is typical of a hot new tech sector that attracts capital and the entrepreneurs to consume it.

"However, deep down we and our investors know that divergence has its limits and in time we need to converge and ultimately consolidate the industry. The sooner we accept this and take steps to ensure it happens in an orderly manner, protecting invested capital, the better. There are well over 100 altnets in the UK, of which over half are doing significant builds, and that's not sustainable. The sheer

difference in the number of IT stacks that people have to build is completely impractical. So, consolidation is inevitable. It's up to all altnets to present ourselves as a common interface,

We don't own these businesses, the shareholders do. Our job is to get on with building the network and getting customers on it

and that will happen when shareholders decide it should happen. We don't own these businesses, the shareholders do. Our job is to get on with building the network and getting customers on it."

Consolidation trends

McArthur noted that capital is already starting to tighten up in the marketplace, and he foresees that during the coming two to three years we are going to see a 'real coming together' of the top second division outlets, as he calls them, to form bigger groups with multiple companies behind them rather than single investments. "It's the natural order," he said. "It needs to happen not just because the ISPs which consume the wholesale products from the networks need to see common standards, there is also a tightening of capital – these will be the big drivers for consolidation."

According to McArthur, instead of 50 or 100 altnets, it actually needs

three to ensure good solid competition. "Ofcom will no doubt shape regulation to encourage sensible consolidation at the appropriate time," he added. "The key to this, to make it go faster, is to make it consensual and capital efficient. If we succeed, then consolidation will happen more as mergers than takeovers, and Freedom Fibre will be in the thick of that. We are just about in the top 20 in the country, that's still pretty small. But we are driving the

agenda on standards and have a close relationship with a major ISP, one of the few altnets that do. And we have a lot to say about this industry with good solid investors behind us."

When Freedom Fibre realises its long-term objectives McArthur will add the achievement to an already impressive catalogue of accomplishments, which of course includes taking Opal Telecom, a small telco, through various acquisitions and relationships, and turning it into a national comms firm. Transiting out of engineering in the nuclear industry into telecoms was also a bold and rewarding step. "It's given our family a comfortable lifestyle and enabled us to operate a large charity," commented McArthur. "Our family charity, the Hamilton Davies Trust, funds capital projects in Irlam where I grew up. We have put back over £23 million in grants and capital investment into the town, and I feel good about that." ■

Just a minute with Neil McArthur...

Role models: Isambard Kingdom Brunel: The things he achieved at his age and how he managed to convince investors to do some outrageous things was unbelievable. And Elon Musk – his vision is remarkable.

Tell us something about yourself we don't know: I'm a petrolhead. I race cars and fly light aircraft.

Your main strength? I'm a tortoise not a hare. I just keep going and am persistent.

Three ideal dinner guests: Isambard Kingdom Brunel, Elon Musk and Andrew Carnegie.

The biggest risk you've taken: Moving into telecoms from electrical engineering in 1996 when I set up Opal Telecom.

Industry bugbear: We haven't got standards right. As an industry we are not anything like as efficient as we should be. And where altnets overbuild we get grumpy. We will absolutely not overbuild other altnets.

If you weren't in ICT what would you be doing? Probably an academic. But I've got the job I was destined to have. My dad worked in the steelworks and taught me engineering. I have lived and I love engineering.

One example of something you have overcome: I've had heart problems which at one point looked like it might floor me. But I've had a pacemaker fitted and now I'm doing 5k runs.

How would you like to be remembered? For helping to regenerate my home town of Irlam and Cadishead.

How do you relax? Gardening, tinkering in the workshop on things like building railway signals.

Top tip for resellers: If you don't add value, don't expect to make a profit.

focused organisation in conjunction with an ISP, which is a retail and customer focused entity," he added. "Therefore, Freedom Fibre was set up to always be wholesale. TalkTalk is our anchor ISP with great experience in delivering a retail and consumer product, so it made sense for us to partner with TalkTalk on both a consumer and B2B wholesale offering."

Freedom Fibre began life with seed capital from McArthur and several private investors. The business received a solid endorsement of its





Gaining an edge through

This year's gold standard Comms Vision Convention (8th-10th November, Gleneagles) will take a multi-faceted research-led approach to exploring why many organisations may only be scratching the surface of their competitive potential, and share insights into what is required to forge a long-term edge over competitors based on four key categories – Culture, Industry Collaboration, Technology and Leadership. Here, Comms Vision Platinum sponsors provide insights into how greater levels of industry collaboration provide an essential source of competitive advantage to channel companies.

Increased collaboration makes for a better connected channel ecosystem and a sharper competitive edge, but only when strategic partnerships meet their joint objectives. "The IT and comms industries have a long history of strategic alliances with organisations joining forces to address a specific opportunity, industry or macro-economic challenge," stated Dale Parkinson, Managing Director, Connectivity, Giacom. "But how many of these have been genuinely successful for the protagonists, partners and customers? In many ways forming the alliance is the easy part – executing on the concept can be considerably harder. While there are a myriad of challenges to address there are a few which seem to appear time and again. Firstly, unity of purpose. The best collaborations are locked on a singular purpose that is shared, supported and driven by all parties in equal measure. Problems can often lurk beneath the surface where this is absent.

"Secondly, shared value creation. A good collaborative venture should generate

new revenues and margins that are accretive to each business. Finally, leadership buy-in. Traditionally, the success of a partnership or alliance needs to be driven from the top to ensure that the appropriate focus is maintained to deliver results."

Parkinson also noted that the comms sector can learn a lesson or two from the software industry which has evolved from set-piece collaborative ventures into interoperable technology ecosystems, where multiple organisations integrate platforms and collaborate to launch new products and services. "Working out how we can replicate this could be a key enabler that accelerates digital transformation for the £10 billion UK SMB market," he added.

Parkinson cited the 2025 switch-off as the most immediate hotspot for technology providers and MSPs, with over two million UK businesses impacted by the move from legacy to digital connectivity products. "The all-IP world opens the door for partners to develop new revenue streams," he stated. "Key amongst these will be the adoption of



Dale Parkinson

The best collaborations are locked on a singular purpose that is shared, supported and driven by all parties in equal measure.

productivity platforms such as Microsoft 365. We see this as a strong adjacent market opportunity for channel partners to address. Similarly, we expect to see continued growth and increased collaboration in the cybersecurity market. SMBs are the most targeted and attacked part of the UK economy. Almost half of all businesses with less

than 40 employees were attacked in 2022, and around 10 per cent of those businesses didn't recover."

Emerging business model

As comms and IT services continue to converge, channel partners are entering a new phase of service provision characterised by multi-vendor solutions and the adoption of as-a-service

business models, observed Parkinson. "To enable this, channel partners will need to work in new ways right through the supply chain and out to the customer interface," he added. "Managing this level of engagement complexity can be costly, difficult and time consuming, especially with multiple vendors and solutions on the pitch."

A multi-vendor supply chain is inevitable in the comms market, noted Paul Smith, Chief Sales Officer, TalkTalk Wholesale Services. "In telecoms, there is no end-to-end provider of everything," he said. "You have some businesses that provide connectivity, some cloud, some security, some IP voice, and so on. But each of those businesses require a blend of vendors to offer more holistic solutions that will enable end customers to succeed. Therefore, it is critical we work together as an industry to encourage interoperability and facilitate easy ways of working. But it doesn't have to be difficult or resource consuming. Through working better together as a sector the end result will be a much improved customer experience, and

h collaboration

we'll open doors to create real differentiation in the market that enhances competitive advantage."

The key elements of supporting a collaborative venture are trust and transparency, believes Smith. "To sustain positive collaborations with both our suppliers and partners we must ensure regular communication and alignment of goals from the beginning of a relationship, so that all parties remain on the same page throughout and are working towards joint goals," he added.

In terms of working-together hotspots, Smith sees equity, diversity and inclusion as an area that will benefit from greater collaboration in the coming years. "We do a huge amount of work on this across TalkTalk, bringing people together to celebrate and elevate diversity in the technology industry, aiming to create a workplace 'for everyone',"

he stated. "Employee networks are at the forefront of this, encouraging different groups to come together and share support and experiences. These communities are invaluable

Through working better together the end result will be a much improved customer experience, and we'll create differentiation that enhances competitive advantage

in highlighting and educating around religious festivals and anniversaries, cultural celebrations and colleagues' social values. But there are always things we could all be doing better and our culture will continually benefit from shared learnings in this area.

"We also see no signs of slowing in the drive towards net zero. Because of this, our Sustainability Director will

join calls with our partners to discuss what we're doing and what they're doing to work more sustainably so we can collaborate to reach our joint goals. Furthermore, in the drive to full fibre, I

expect collaboration in this area to only increase."

From a product perspective, Smith says cloud and security will also be key areas for collaboration. Both are thriving with trends showing increasing workloads being moved to the cloud and more complex cyberthreats driving the need for more secure measures to protect today's businesses. "Wholesalers will therefore need to work with a range of vendors to deliver holistic solutions that support end customer needs as they develop," he stated.

This means that more than ever, businesses need to be adaptable and efficient, pointed out Mike Mills, Director of Cloud and Infrastructure Partners, Gamma. "Effective communication, reduced risk and a solid foundation to address sociological changes and facilitate collaboration should be at the top of everyone's mind," he said. "In this era of industry change one thing has become abundantly clear... developing competitive advantage through industry

Continued on page 28



Paul Smith

It is critical we work together as an industry to encourage interoperability and facilitate easy ways of working.

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Only 5% of contact centres provide standard model headsets to their staff. All day comfort and style is a personal choice, so most businesses let people purchase their own.

This offers resellers an opportunity to introduce the VT range into their customers. The choice is wide, and each model offers the user unique features to suit their role. By introducing the range, you can gain your customer's loyalty by offering them a premium product at massively discounted prices.

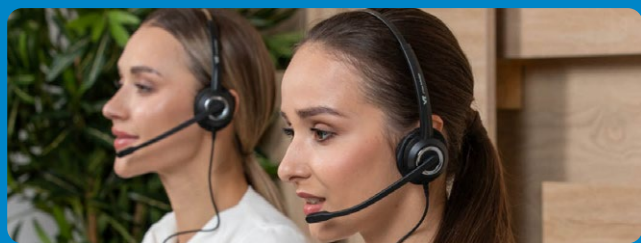
The superior quality VT suite of headsets retails at 20-30%

cheaper than the major brands, and their UK distributor Viegli are offering a 50% introductory margin on certain models.

Most users fit into three main categories: - Traditional corded (with quick disconnect) for use with desk phones, USB corded for use with most softphones/MS Teams, and Cordless, using either Bluetooth or DECT technology.

VT6200

Traditional Corded – Ideal for call centres and busy offices because of its noise cancelling microphone and soft leatherette ear cushions. The VT6200 comes in Mono or Duo style and retails at just £24.99+vat (Duo). Viegli are offering 35% introductory margin on this model while stocks last.



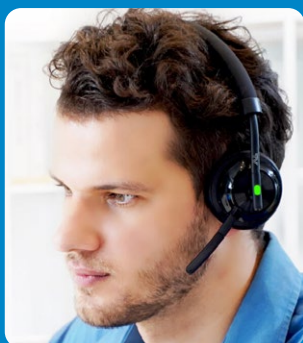
VT8200

USB Corded – For all day comfort, users look for a stylish, flexible headset with outstanding noise cancellation and audio quality. The VT8200 has a medical grade liquid silicon headband for soft comfortable wear, excellent noise cancellation and an integrated busy light to avoid interruptions. It retails at £58.33+vat (Duo) and Viegli are offering an introductory 50% margin on this product while stock lasts.



VTX300

UC- Cordless – The ultimate blend of price and performance, these are top of the range and the VTX300 is a stunning example. It comes pre-paired with a BT100u dongle and a base station for wirelessly charging mobile phones. 10 hours talk time, medical grade liquid silicone headband. CVC8.0 technology makes it the best noise cancelling headset in the range. This Duo model retails at £163+vat for the headset, base and dongle. Viegli are offering a 50% introductory margin whilst stocks last.



Mike Mills

Developing competitive advantage through industry collaboration is absolutely key to success.

Continued from page 27 collaboration is absolutely key to success."

Gamma has for a long time forged strategic partnerships as well as channel partnerships, and Mills says that when industry powerhouses such as AWS and Microsoft link up with

secure, effective voice and video collaboration. This transformative impact cannot be understated – an impact made possible by partnership and collaboration on a vast and ever increasing scale."

According to Mills, the comms industry's hottest collaboration point is cloud

Effective communication, reduced risk and a foundation to address sociological changes and facilitate collaboration should be at the top of everyone's mind

companies like Gamma it becomes obvious that such collaborations amplify value across the board. "For instance, with the AWS partnership we've streamlined the process of transitioning to Amazon Connect, reducing time to value by up to 90 per cent," stated Mills.

technology. "We acted on this with the acquisition of MissionLabs in 2021 which underlined our belief in Amazon Connect's growth potential," he added. "When it comes to Microsoft, the emergence of Teams Phone

"This is bolstered by our Microsoft partnership where we've transformed the way businesses communicate on Microsoft Teams, aiding in the deployment of

It takes Vision to be a leader

Comms Vision (8th-10th November 2023, Gleneagles Hotel) is the leading annual leadership forum for CEO, MD and CTO delegates making up the major league of the UK reseller community. Places are limited and by invitation: If you would like to join us this year, please register your interest to attend at www.commsvision.com

offers businesses enhanced operational efficiencies. Our partnership with Ingram Micro to offer Operator Connect for Microsoft Teams to its UK partners exemplifies this commitment to multi-layered collaboration. And we've taken strides in Europe, launching Operator Connect into European markets from 2021. This is an ongoing and expanding venture. Collaborations like these mean customers get the best of both worlds – the advanced capabilities of Microsoft and Amazon paired with Gamma's services."

Challenges

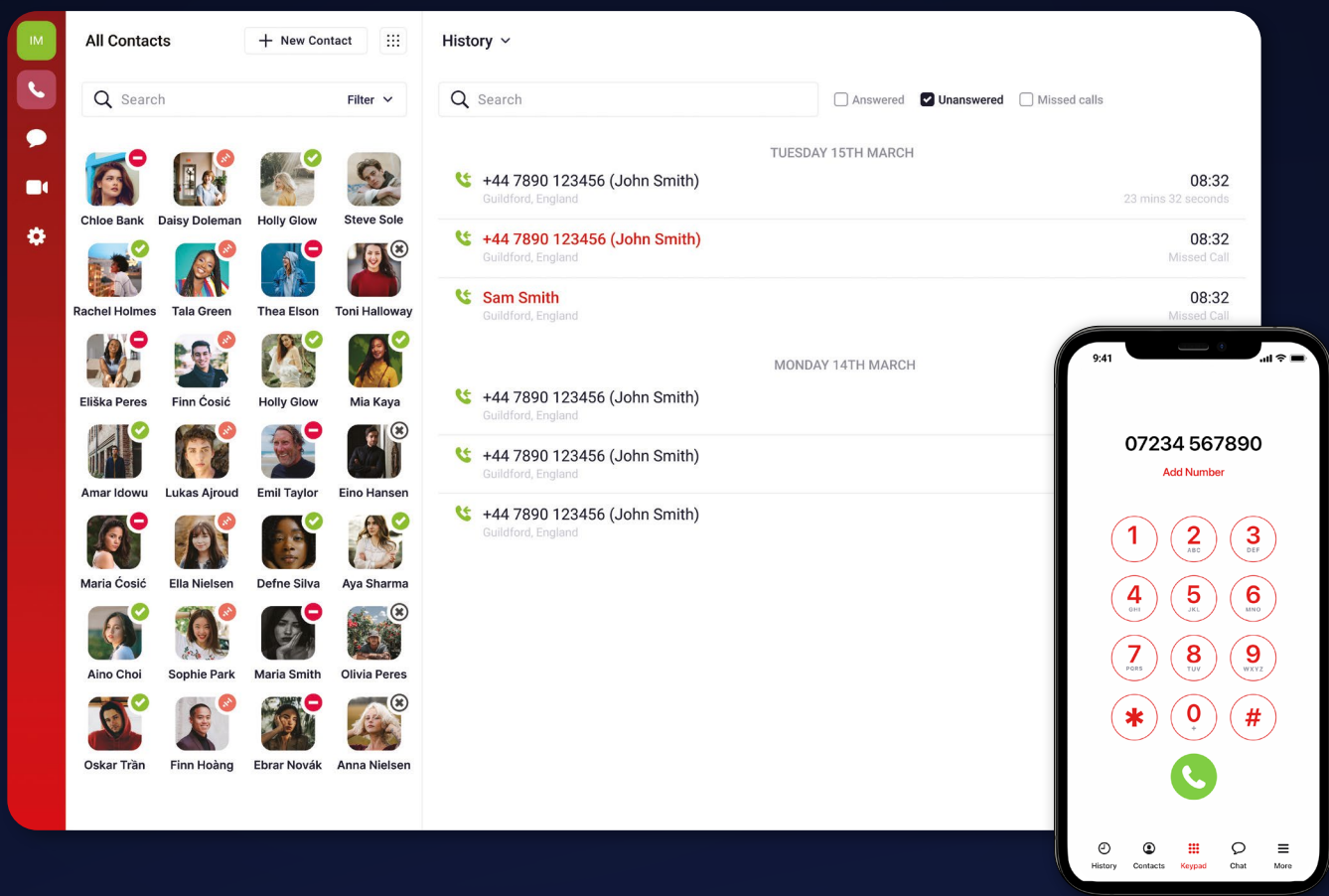
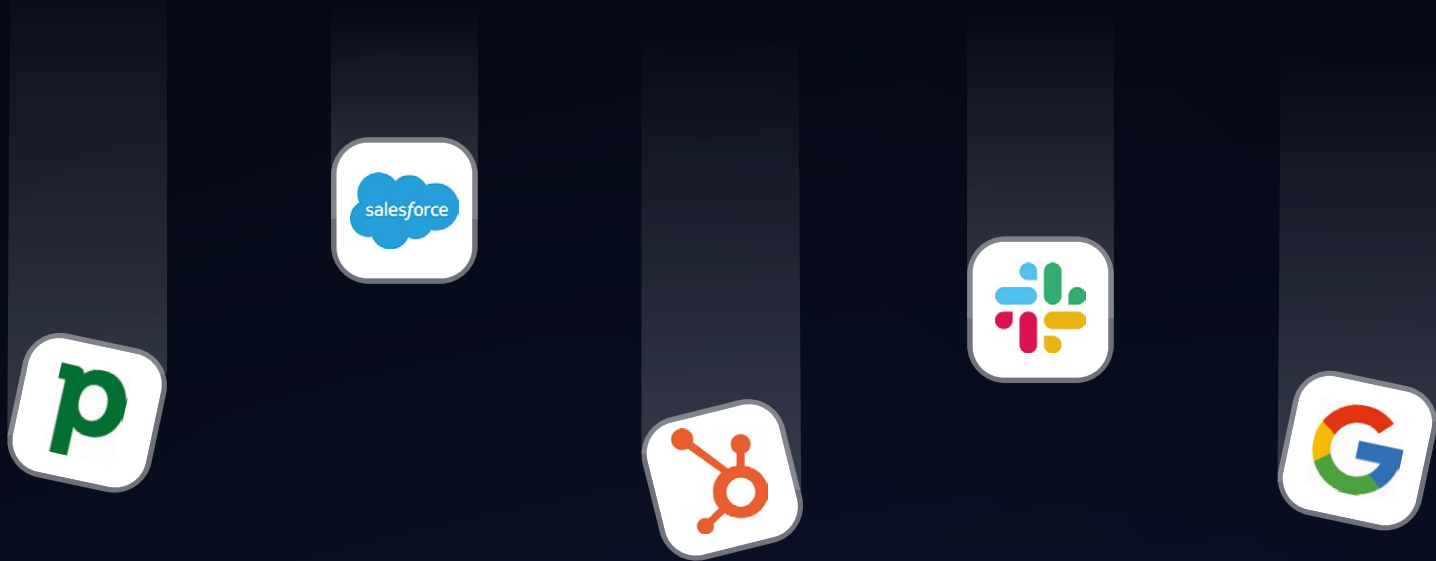
However, every aspect of doing business faces the test of time and collaboration is no different, pointed out Mills. "Challenges like integrating new technologies and maintaining consistent service quality across various geographies are an inevitability," added Mills. "Getting past those challenges involves flexibility, innovation and total, unwavering commitment to the core values of collaboration. But it's not just about big businesses fitting together nicely, there needs to be a focus on human-centric solutions."

Mills also noted that sustaining a collaborative venture demands constant adaptation and foresight, and being ready for the unforeseen. "We build proactive behaviour into our collaborative strategy," he added. "Industry collaboration takes many forms. It's something we live and breathe through strategic partnerships, active engagement in industry dialogues, and a commitment to innovation." ■

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CNA comms national awards

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THE CHANNEL'S MOST PRESTIGIOUS AWARDS RETURNS IN 2023 WITH A BRAND NEW VENUE AND DATE

The Comms National Awards, widely recognised as the UK ICT Channel's top awards event, are taking place later this month at our new venue at the Park Plaza Hotel in the heart of Westminster, London on the 28th of September.

Now in its 22nd year, the Comms National Awards is the ICT channel's most respected and coveted awards process, recognising the success of UK resellers and the suppliers who support them in providing top class solutions to public and private sector business customers. Independently judged by our selected panel of distinguished industry experts, the process rewards quality across the channel spectrum with awards in both reseller (customer solutions) and vendor (service to the channel) categories.

As ever, the entertainment at the CNA finalists' night will be top notch. Last year, broadcast and journalist, Jeremy Vine was the consummate awards host, and who could forget the 2018 event, when Spandau Ballet legend Tony Hadley provided a 'Gold' curtain raiser. Previous presenters have included Anton Du Beke, Patrick Kielty, Rufus Hound, Hugh Dennis, Michael McIntyre, Marcus Gabby Logan, Stephen Mangan and James Nesbitt, so guests can be assured the entertainment will be top drawer.

All these ingredients add up to the Comms National Awards being acknowledged as the evening the channel assembles in style to recognise success and network with industry friends and colleagues.



Adrian Sunderland (pictured), CEO of the Mobile/IoT reseller category sponsor commented, "We help partners to find and win profitable mobile data, M2M and IoT opportunities providing innovative solutions you cannot buy from anyone else. We are looking forward to celebrating resellers who have excelled in this area. The opportunity for the channel is massive."

For all the finalists visit www.cnawards.com

TOP SPONSOR GIACOM PROUD TO SUPPORT CHANNEL SUCCESS



I'm thrilled to be announcing Giacom as Headline Sponsor of The Comms National Awards 2023. The CNA's are a highlight in the calendar year as they give the ICT industry a platform to get together for a memorable night of celebration.

2023 has been a year of evolution not only for us as a business as we've brought together our Cloud, Comms and Billing portfolio into one offering. But also within the

wider ICT sector especially now the Nationwide Stop Sell of WLR has taken effect. Our industry is now faced with incredible opportunity as we move towards the 2025 Switch Off, and I encourage you all to grab this with both hands and continue to make a positive difference as we move towards a digital future.

I'm sure you'll all agree with me when I say evolution and recognition is what motivates

us to do the best we can, and we should all be so proud of our contribution to the ICT sector.

The Comms National Awards evening is set to be one of the biggest yet, so let us raise our glasses and toast to another amazing year and the incredible efforts of our teams. We look forward to celebrating with you all - I hope you all have a fantastic time.

Terry O'Brien - CEO of Giacom

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Two titans unite!

At the heart of Voiceflex and Telavox's flourishing partnership lies a mutual commitment to simplify operations in a fiercely competitive market. Telavox's innovative approach to streamlining business communications aligns perfectly with Voiceflex's two decades of heritage as pioneers, ensuring these benefits are passed on to resellers.

Comms Dealer spoke with Voiceflex CCO Paul Taylor and Telavox Global Sales Manager – Service Provider, Andy Brunt about the power of their partnership.

CD: What was the genesis of your partnership and what foundations was it built upon?

PT: "We did a lot of due diligence back in 2021 to look for providers that had the same ethos as us and would meet several needs.

"We looked at what our customers want, what our resellers want and what we as a service integrator want. Telavox ticked all these boxes."

AB: "Voiceflex has an extensive partner base in the UK and more than 20 years of heritage. As a top UCaaS provider in Forrester's Global report, we can support their brand with technological excellence. This is two titans coming together to offer best-in-call services."

"As we expand across Europe, the service provider model is our go to strategy. It's about working closely through a symbiotic relationship where both entities bring value to the table".

CD: With your award-winning Voiceflex Flow platform currently in the market, what have been its early success stories?

PT: "We've seen many of our partners migrating their customers from their current platform to Flow and



As a top UCaaS provider in Forrester's Global report, we can support their brand with technological excellence.

Andy Brunt, Global Sales Manager – Service Provider, Telavox

unleashing the benefits of UCaaS. This is much more cost effective and gives those resellers a lot more value from each customer.

"We've received positive feedback particularly from the white-labelling capabilities of the product. Most of our resellers have adopted this version of Flow as it enables them to provide custom packages and platforms that are tailored to the vertical markets they are looking to address.

"The popularity of Flow within our own reseller base means we are now looking for external partners

that we know can benefit from the platform."

AB: "We are fully integrated into Voiceflex's systems and have ensured that the customer journey has been designed to be simple and easy to use.

"This has made those migrations that Paul mentioned incredibly smooth. All the ordering, processing and provisioning is done through the BSS on the Voiceflex side.

"Then there are APIs directly feeding into our BSS backend, so the customer experience is



We've seen many of our partners migrating their customers from their current platform to Flow and unleashing the benefits of UCaaS.

Paul Taylor, CCO, Voiceflex

the same from what they were accustomed to before taking on our platform.

"There's no change in the online customer journey and no need to retrain resellers with new systems or procedures. We've truly simplified business communications."

CD: With the first two years of your partnership seeing so much success, what is next for Telavox and Voiceflex?

AB: "We have 110 developers in Sweden, allowing us to channel our resources into advancing the platform roadmap and identifying emerging market trends. There are three forthcoming developments we're particularly enthusiastic about.

"One of these is Fixed Mobile Convergence, which we know a lot about due to our base in the Nordics. Paul and I have both been speaking about this for quite a time now and see this as one of the next steps that the UK is probably going to take."

PT: "A major product that should be launching next month is the OTT app, which gives you the connection directly into Microsoft Teams without having to purchase the business phone licence.

We've priced it to be highly competitive in the market.

"This is natively embedded within Teams. It's not a middleware licence. It's been very well thought out, very well designed, and it's going to have a lot more benefits moving forward because it attracts a completely different market into telecommunications.

"We have another product we hope to launch at CommsVision called Omnichat, a WhatsApp for Business API application. Using this with the Flow product is incredibly powerful. This is a silver bullet and no one else in the market currently has this application."

AB: "Additionally, we're also focusing on Omnichannel and are aiming to introduce our proprietary platform in 2024, with an emphasis on AI and knowledge bases. In this regard, our vision aligns closely with Voiceflex as we both recognise the shift towards online communication.

"Our ultimate goal is to incorporate all these advancements into the omnichannel platform, ensuring it's fully white-labelled and with simplicity at the core. ■

For more information email: sales@voiceflex.com

Opening minds to neurodiversity

Most, if not all company leaders have opened their minds to diversity and inclusion as both a moral and business imperative, and are not shy about beating the D&I drum. But for those neuro divergent people who remain systematically marginalised, the drumbeat signals no more than one form of difference being prioritised over another. Such dissonance is symptomatic of people who think differently being judged differently when, in fact, their neurodiversity marks them out as being extremely capable and beneficial to organisations, especially in the tech sector. In last month's Comms Dealer Channel Forecast session, Julie Mills, CEO and founder, Support to Win, and Steve Smith, CTO and founder, Astro Technology Group, called on the comms sector to embrace neurodiversity and provide a safe haven for neurodiverse people – while harnessing their unique skills for a competitive edge.

In 2021 The Office for National Statistics (ONS) released data that showed just 22 per cent of autistic adults are in any form of employment. "If we are going to get serious about diversity and inclusion we have to get serious about neurodiversity," stated Mills. "It is appalling that so few neurodiverse people are in employment. This is a big talent pool that businesses, especially in the tech industry, are missing out on. We need to work on amplifying this message."

According to Smith, organisations need a multitude of different thinking skills, whether to gain a helicopter view, business foresight, speculation or applied to particular functions. "And in our industry, right down to the binary, that requires different mindsets," he stated. "Diversity of thinking is essential for business

success, and neuro divergent people are often very good at specific areas. I'm autistic and much happier working in binary than I am in English. When trouble shooting I'm completely focused on that job. There's nothing wrong. It's just the way I'm made up. However, it is wrong to stereotype and think autistic people behave in a certain way. And it's wrong to say they don't have any value because of their neurodiversity. Neuro diverse people can provide a business with a competitive advantage. They are an asset to any organisation."

Business leaders, in the main, are seeking to develop environments where people with differences are routinely included, but all too often these efforts do not take into account people with non-visible differences including autism. "Company leaders are proud of adhering to the Equality Act, but ultimately



Julie Mills

We had a relatively new person in the business break down and say, 'I've never been able to come out before and say I have autism'. That is very sad

where is the neurodiversity piece in that?," asked Mills. "There is no employment law to say that neuro diverse people can speak out about their challenges or diagnosis and still get the same opportunity. It's not a legal requirement. If we fail to recruit neuro divergent people we're potentially missing out on employing the next Elon Musk or Bill Gates.

"Removing the stigma and putting in support frameworks for these exceptional minds gives people a safe place to say 'I am neurodiverse', and that starts with top level management. Yet most business leaders don't know what can be achieved in their company by people with neuro diverse minds. It's not difficult to embrace – but not talking about this is one of the biggest problems."

Smith noted that the neuro diverse talent pool has not



Neurodiversity inclusion

gone unnoticed by the Army which has wised up to the advantages of recruiting such unique candidates. "I've spoken to people in other areas of the military where autistic people are being recruited in specific types of jobs because of their focus," he explained. "It's important to keep an open mind and be as supportive as possible to give people an opportunity. Preconceived ideas about neurodiversity don't help. Every neuro divergent person is an individual and like any other person has individual needs. A specialist in this area once said to me, 'people have impairments and differences, it's other people that make it a disability'. That has stayed with me."

Smith is autistic himself, and in recent years has learned more about communication and eye contact having spent his working life being happy in a comms cupboard working with technology, shut away from people. "I dropped out of school at 13 and on paper my qualifications are non-existent," he stated. "I scraped into an apprenticeship and after 12 years in the industry co-founded Astro. I've only got through two interviews in my life, it's a stressful situation. So as part of our recruitment strategy we hold trial days. During our apprentice selection process we try to understand the person. This is a more friendly way of recruiting and better than a make or break interview."

Smith explained that when he dropped out of school at 13, that didn't mean he stopped learning. "I read books on nuclear physics and electronics at a much

If neurodiversity inclusion is not recognised and celebrated like any other human difference in the D&I spectrum, it devalues every inclusive declaration made by a business

deeper level than at school," he stated. "I was repairing guitars at 14 and wiring my own electronic circuits, fixing things around the house – none of this comes up on a CV. The moral approach is to be inclusive and give everyone a chance, but businesses generally take the path of least resistance and are missing out as a result."

Overcoming stigma

But talent acquisition strategies generally do not include a neurodiversity component, and Mills observed that when people display odd behaviours during an interview they are potentially not going to be successful in that application. "People have preconceived ideas about autism with the stigma suggesting that neuro diverse people won't be able to cope within working environments," she added.

"Having brought up a neurological divergent child into being a wonderful adult, I've seen the struggles and capabilities of what I call exceptional minds. My son has Aspergers, is an amazing developer and was employed because of his Aspergers. This can be a scary subject for many businesses. But in reality, when including neurodiversity as part of a programme you come to see it's not difficult

to make changes that ultimately help businesses go to the next level."

Mills also noted that the processes businesses need to adopt begin with communication. "If we look at how we are going to implement a programme to get the best out of our neuro diverse people then let's communicate with them in a way that fits with their thinking," she explained. "You only have to make small changes to make a difference. When we looked at our own business it became obvious that we had people who were either diagnosed or 'disclosed'. Likewise, they may already be in your workforce. Are you getting the most out of them? Are they struggling? Have they lived their entire life masking their neurodiversity? We had a relatively new person in the business break down and say, 'I've never been able to come out before and say I have autism'. That is very sad."

Smith pointed out that up to 20 per cent of the UK population is diagnosed as neuro divergent, so the chances are that many businesses will have unwittingly tapped into this talent pool already. "There's also a large

Continued on page 34



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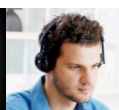


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Continued from page 33 number of undiagnosed people, or people who have been diagnosed and don't want to share that information," he added. "Because of the stigma attached to autism they are afraid they might be labelled in a way that impacts their career. Many neuro divergent people mask their condition and put on an act. We're missing out on their talent as we are not getting the true person."

Mental health

According to Mills, undiagnosed neuro differences could, to some extent, underlie the mental health discussion which has high profile in the public domain. "People can now stand up and say, 'I suffer with my mental health', but we need to get more granular," she said. "It is down to us to prevent our teams suffering with their mental health. We've been working on this for a long time and it can be easy to make progress. For example, my son benefitted when he was given a visual timetable at school. It changed the way he reacted to instruction. In the workplace, it could also be as simple as changing a communication piece. Furthermore, I believe it's a moral obligation to embrace neurodiversity."

If neurodiversity inclusion is not recognised and celebrated like any other human difference in the D&I spectrum it devalues every inclusive declaration made by a business. Equally, the language of D&I routinely points to enabling people of all kinds to be their 'authentic selves', but at the same



Steve Smith

It's not an over statement to say that neuro diverse people can provide a business with a competitive advantage. They are an asset to any organisation

time organisational thinking and culture may be geared towards neuro diverse people feeling that they need to hide their true selves. "We all agree that people are not the same but there is a standard preconception about what people should do and how they should behave," observed Mills. "My absolute passion is to get the best out of people, and each individual should have their own path within a team. We're currently going through neuro divergency accreditation, looking at our business, where the gaps are and how the organisation needs to be run to support

neuro divergent people. This is building our confidence to move further forward."

Raising awareness

Intertwining neurological differences into strategy and culture, and raising awareness among neurotypical colleagues, all boils down to business leaders being 'people persons', believes Smith. "They need to learn about the people in their organisation," he stated. "And when recruiting, it's useful to have some understanding of the different neuro divergent profiles. There's plenty of information out there, and certain charities provide support to high functioning autistic people to help them get jobs. There's lots of information and help available for business leaders to better understand the pool of talent they are missing out on – and not be afraid of it.

"That said, this issue is much bigger than the comms industry and something that needs to go further up the chain towards government. Perhaps we should be considering starting apprenticeships at a younger age. That would lend itself to the needs of neuro divergent people who currently sit out school for the full term when many clearly have talents that could be put to use now."

Mills reiterated that the technology industry, by its nature, attracts neuro diverse people. And she underlined that there is an opportunity for businesses to gain a competitive advantage through giving people who think differently the right support to 'do amazing things'. "Wouldn't it be great if the comms sector had its own charter to drive home the message that this industry is right for neuro divergent people because the support is there," stated Mills.

"But most of our sector is made up of sub-50 people organisations without HR functions, so it needs to be easy to make changes. And it needs to be more than a wear a T shirt day. Make it personal to you and embrace what is an absolute ability – not a disability. And don't be afraid, it's not difficult."

More key points to consider...

QUALIFICATIONS do not give you the full picture of a person. My son read The Guinness Book of Records before going to bed instead of bedtime stories as he wanted to educate himself. He learned programming through reading books, but there are no paper qualifications next to these progressions. The way that people are judged by their exam results – and not given the support they need – must change.

Julie Mills, CEO, Support to Win

THE key to unlock the potential of neurodiversity is education and awareness about the main diagnostic labels, which always comes down to talking to the individual. Aiming to make neurodiversity as mainstream as possible would also be a great start. A friend of mine at The Worshipful Company of Information Technologists has just discovered that she's autistic and is putting together a website with collective stories from neuro divergent people as a support tool for similar people – and employers as these career and life stories demonstrate talent.

Steve Smith, CTO, Astro Technology Group

IN THE first of a series of monthly insight comments neurodiversity champion Julie Mills, CEO, Support to Win, argues why it's time to change perspectives on people with neuro diverse variations and make diversity truly inclusive – and more beneficial to businesses.

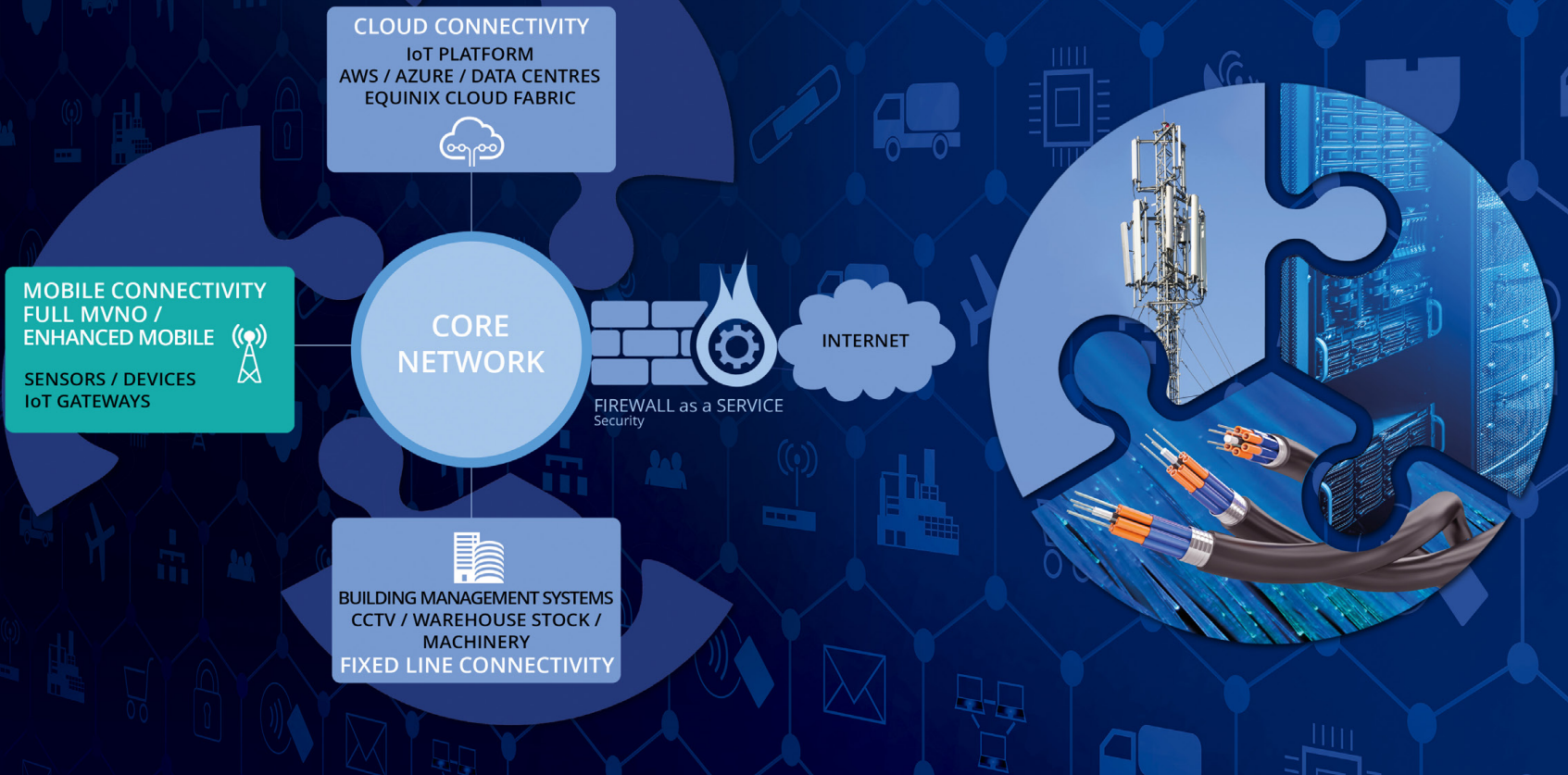
Around 15 to 20 per cent of the population are thought to be neuro divergent (ND for short). And with such a large group, you can't afford to generalise. But the one thing they share in common is that their brains work differently. No less capable, no less valuable, no less imaginative, hard working, collaborative or intelligent. The problem is that workplaces and management processes tend to be rigidly neurotypical. This puts constraints on what ND people can achieve, leading to performance issues, conflict and potentially even mental health crises. That's not to say that ND people can't cope with a typical work environment. Millions do. In fact, you may already employ an ND person and not know it. But the question I'm asked most about ND by channel pros is how a typical 10–100 employee company can find the time and resources to accommodate the needs of ND people. It's the right question to ask. Another, more honest one is, 'what's in it for me?'. Be clear on this: It takes far less material investment than you think and the benefits are extraordinary.

If we fail to recruit neuro divergent people we're potentially missing out on employing the next Elon Musk or Bill Gates



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Driving board diversity

The gap between where we are now and where we need to be in terms of increasing the number of women on boards is narrowing, but building a pipeline of female talent for the top remains a case of slow progress versus urgent need, writes Emma Pazgrat, Head of Partner Channel, Pangea Connected.

If, like me, you're looking forward to the day when we don't need to have conversations about gender equity in the workplace, it's encouraging to see an increase in women on boards across 585 of FTSE all-share listed firms from 36 per cent to 40 per cent over the past year. But nearly one fifth of FTSE 100 firms aren't hitting the mandatory requirement of 40 per cent female representation.

And according to research by 50/50 WOB, to reach gender parity by 2030 the percentage of women joining boards annually needs to exceed 50 per cent. That's quite a jump. In the USA the percentage of women joining boards in 2022 was 39 per cent, which is lower than in 2019 and 2021. And most of these took up newly created positions rather than replacing male colleagues.

It's not just about getting women into the boardroom, it's about the positions they hold. While some companies have seen an increase in

women on boards, when we dig down into their roles the picture looks less rosy. Figures from Ernst & Young Global show that 91 per cent of women on FTSE 100 boards are in non-executive director roles, and only nine women currently hold CEO positions in FTSE 100 companies. The situation is even worse for women of colour who are not represented at all at CEO level in these companies.

Overlooked talent

It's astonishing that so many businesses are still overlooking 50 per cent of the talent pool. Several factors may be at play here, like unconscious bias, stalled diversity strategies, a global economic downturn diverting energy away from gender equity initiatives, and the broken rung at the crucial first step up to management. Once they've reached top positions, many women in leadership are leaving their jobs because of micro-aggressions, inflexible working conditions and having to work harder than



Emma Pazgrat

Engagement is a powerful way to drive real change – and I'm on a mission to uplift and inspire the next generation of women leaders in technology

their male counterparts just to stay level.

Professional women have a unique perspective that can challenge the status quo, and in senior positions they're role models for aspiring young employees who increasingly demand inclusivity and equity in their workplaces. A 2019 study by S&P Global Market Intelligence Quantamental shows that 'when women lead, firms win'. The study cites a 20 per cent increase in stock price momentum in the 24 months after female CEOs were appointed across Russell

3000 companies. Women CFOs also saw a six per cent rise in profitability and eight per cent bigger stock returns compared with the market average. Improving gender diversity on boards isn't just the right thing to do, it makes business sense too.

Being a woman in tech, which is a notoriously male dominated industry, can be challenging. Women make up only 13 per cent of the UK STEM workforce and just five per cent are in leadership positions. I was previously the first female

Account Manager in the IoT space and the only woman UK Regional Sales Specialist. I hired a female Regional Sales Specialist to coach and mentor as my successor.

At Pangea women are recruited on merit not gender, and we over-index on females in leading roles with a pathway to board level. I'm blazing a trail that I hope more women will follow. I've overseen huge efficiencies and overhauled our partners' experience, resulting in a best ever NPS score of 74 against an industry average of 28. Under my watch my team has smashed KPIs and targets with exceptional performances across all metrics.

As well as promoting and supporting three incredible female colleagues in Strategic Account Manager roles, we need to take the conversation out into the industry more widely. By talking to other women, leading by example and engaging male colleagues in the debate we raise awareness of the need for gender parity. When the topic is openly discussed, it's harder to overlook. To support empowerment and diversity I hosted an International Women's Day event alongside the Horsepower partnership which included men, women and members of the LGBTQ+ community. Engagement is a powerful way to drive real change.

I'm on a mission to uplift and inspire the next generation of women leaders in technology. As a working mother I understand the challenges of fulfilling professional and personal goals, and I hope to exemplify how it's possible to thrive in both areas. ■



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Channel leaders continue

The link between staff support mechanisms and the rising cost of living is strengthening with channel companies continuing to go the extra mile by enhancing existing initiatives and introducing new employee benefits ranging from ongoing pay increases to mental health support.



CHRIS MORRISEY
LILY COMMS

We have introduced measures to help our employees, all of which will be kept in place after the cost-of-living crisis subsides. We conducted a full salary benchmarking exercise to ensure everyone is on a fair wage and continue to offer flexible and hybrid working, which reduces travel costs. We pay for daily transportation for those who need to be office based and must use public transport. We also offer access to free mental health support and discounted gym membership, which has helped to boost staff morale, retention and recruitment.



DARREN GARLAND
PROVU
COMMUNICATIONS

For the last two years ProVu has increased wages for all staff at rates significantly higher than we have done in the past, acknowledging the difficulties everyone is facing and supporting them through the cost-of-living crisis. We are flexible with our staff and deal with their needs on an individual basis, sometimes with advance wages to help in certain circumstances. We increased everyone's holiday allowance by two days, giving staff more flexibility and reducing the need to take unpaid leave.



CHERIE HOWLETT
JOLA

We have given a one-off cost-of-living crisis bonus and access to free financial advice and counselling to all our employees. We also introduced an EMI scheme which has delivered large first payouts to all employees. As each team member contributes to company growth, we don't want to lose the talent and experience we have built up. We ensure confidential specialist support is available for anyone that needs it. Members of our team have been accepted for mortgages, can complete home improvement projects and go on family holidays, which we are aware is not the case for many. We also support our partners and their customers by introducing pay-monthly as-a-service solutions with no upfront payments.



VISH CHHATRALIA
EXERTIS

We launched an Emergency Support Fund this year where colleagues can make a confidential application for support. We have 30 Mental Health First Aiders across all our sites who are ready to listen and provide signposting to colleagues who require support. We bolstered manager briefing to enhance consistency for 121s with their teams, and further support personal wellbeing. We have four Employee Resource Groups which provide support for those in ethnic, women, disability and LGBTIA+ communities, which are most vulnerable and under pressure. We are a charity partner for Mental Health UK, and our Mental Health First Aiders provide first-point-of-contact care for colleagues if they require it. This support will always be a constant in our ethics. We offer free volunteering days to all employees, giving them the opportunity to raise money and support local communities.



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cost of living aid for staff



LINDA PATTERSON
TD SYNnex

Both this year and last, we significantly increased the budget for salary increases and most co-workers were given a further one-off cash payment before Christmas. We'd already moved to a 40 per cent of time in the office policy and to save travel costs, co-workers were given the option to work from home fully during December 2022. We have been making basic cupboard supplies available in discrete locations for anyone who needs them. Mental Health First Aiders are available to everyone, and we've introduced a Wellbeing Day. We have four business resource groups in the UK promoting DE&I, and in July we relaunched our social and charity committee. While the market remains challenging, our intention is to keep all this support for co-workers in place.



CHRISTIAN LINDSAY-SMITH
INTERCITY

At the beginning of the year, we provided an unprecedented level of pay increases in response to the rising economic pressures. We weighted these more heavily towards lower paid colleagues, ensuring that price increases didn't result in additional difficulties for those who have been struggling. Additionally, all Intercity colleagues received a cost-of-living bonus in July 2022. We continue to assess inflationary impact and recognise our responsibility to support colleagues through this period."



ADAM CATHCART
ONECOM PARTNERS

Onecom Group is taking steps to support employees by prioritising their health and overall wellbeing. We have arranged workshops on financial wellbeing, featuring insights from external experts on practical budgeting strategies, effective financial planning techniques, and managing day-to-day expenses. Recognising the potential impact of the economic climate on mental health, we offer a dedicated network of Mental Health First Aiders who are available to provide advice for dealing with financial stress. We also extend a complementary breakfast offering at our offices, giving staff the opportunity to catch up with colleagues informally promoting a family atmosphere where team members can support and advise each other. Our focus is on nurturing personal growth, resilience, and overall wellbeing.



JAMIE HUGHES
EVOLVE IP

We've introduced an Annual Wellness Day and work with a specialist external company to offer enhanced levels of expertise. We also have regular fruit deliveries and subsidised vending, and host monthly Lunch & Learn sessions where everyone can meet face-to-face, interact and share their knowledge. This brings business and mental health benefits. We have a pool table, computer console and other activities so staff can switch off and break away from their desk.



MARK PILLOW
VOIP UNLIMITED

"Within the last year our open door policy and support initiatives have evolved and we've been regularly assessing the impact of the recent economic changes on the team to ensure no one is left behind. As a company we've enhanced support initiatives further, offering flexible work arrangements to accommodate changing circumstances, actively adapting our policies and support systems to ensure employee well-being is looked after."

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Resilient amid change

The telecoms service space continues to showcase resilient trading supported by in demand services, contracted revenue, inflation busting price rises and ongoing, but slowing, M&A activity, writes Philip Carse, Analyst at Megabyte.com. Meanwhile, pressure on FTTP altnets continues to mount.

As in recent quarters, telecoms services trading remains relatively robust and resilient to broader macro issues, buoyed by mission critical and consumer must have services, contracted revenues and inflation-beating price rises by the incumbents. This is in contrast to longer sales cycles, more price sensitivity in IT Managed Services (which of course many comms resellers are also exposed to) and project delays or cancellations for some IT consultancies.

Aggregators Gamma and Giacom show similar resilience among resellers, broadly hiding under cover of incumbent price rises. For its first half to June 2023, Gamma noted trading in-line with market expectations for EBITDA of £110.4-117.2m, representing growth of 5-11.5% driven by its UK indirect (renamed Business) and direct (now Enterprise) and continental European operations. Alongside its rebranding and a new portal, Giacom revealed current revenue run rates of £390m (estimated EBITDA of £75-80m), growing at 13% organically.

This picture of resilient telecoms trading has also featured in recent management updates with the likes of Wireless Logic, Exponential-e, SCG, Babble,



Philip Carse

Pressures on FTTP altnets triggered by interest rate rises, a reduced investor funding appetite and growing competition from BT and VMO2 are increasingly sorting the wheat from the chaff

Wifinity, Opus Technology, Wavenet and IP Integration, while recently under-performing Maintel has benefited from improving equipment supply chains (and internal measures). Of course, there will always be companies going in the opposite direction, with headwinds for those with particular vertical exposure (such as retail and hospitality) or commoditised connectivity, while the BT Openreach stop

sell of analogue services such as WLR and ISDN will expose those resellers who have not prepared for an all IP world.

M&A remains subdued

Aside from one very large deal being announced (Vodafone UK and Three UK), telecoms M&A remains subdued, impacted by higher interest rates, lower debt availability and buyer caution. From an average of ten-plus comms reseller deals a

month in 2022, volumes have dipped to mid-to-high single digits in recent months, and most have been small with the few deals at published or estimated >£10m valuations including Focus/Zest4, Wavenet/Adept, BCM/Pure, Babble/Techquarters and Wireless Logic/Webbing.

Recent buyers include the usual buy and build suspects – 4Com, Babble, Croft, InTEC, SCG, as well

as BDR, Redsquid and, launching its new buy and build, CloudClevr.

Pressures on FTTP altnets triggered by interest rate rises, reduced investor funding appetite and growing competition from BT and VMO2 are increasingly sorting the wheat from the chaff. Last quarter saw the first sale of a fairly well established player due to not being able to raise funding (Trooli), while this quarter has seen the first failure of a supposedly well funded altnet, with rural Wales and Scotland-focused Broadway Partners backer Downing LLP throwing in the towel after spending £29m of a £145m facility (in the process passing just 10k premises).

We are also seeing consolidation and change among backers (for example, abrdn buying out Amber/NDIF from Airband, ditto Kompass Kapital/ Atmosclear Investments Group in Lightspeed Group, Ares replacing Sequoia as tooob's debt provider), while Gigaclear had to bring in a new equity backer for further funding (Equitix). Even relatively well funded altnets are adapting their business plans to conserve cash (and achieve profitability sooner to unlock new funding), with existing funding now diluted by higher interest rates and

Continued on page 42



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A **nimans** initiative

Knight's key hires



Nikki Freeman

Luke Ettenfield-Nann

KNIGHT Corporate Finance has added more comms sector expertise to its practice with the appointments of Nikki Freeman as Business Development Director, who joins from Gamma Communications, and Luke Ettenfield-Nann as Senior Corporate Finance Manager, who moves from TalkTalk Business. Both have spent the majority of their careers in the comms industry. Freeman's new remit includes extending Knight's reach within the sector and helping

business owners gain an understanding of the strategic options open to them, while Ettenfield-Nann will focus on transactions. Knight co-founder Paul Billingham stated: "Nikki and Luke will enhance our sector expertise."

Freeman added: "There has been a significant amount of M&A activity within the industry and we expect that to increase. I'm looking forward to supporting partners on their journeys." Ettenfield-Nann commented: "Having previously worked in audit and advisory positions I'm looking forward to being in an advisory role again." Knight has completed 14 deals in 2023, including advising on transactions for Zest4, NGC, NTE and MPS.

Also on the move...

THE appointment of Tony Miller by Giacom as Mobile Account Director for Scotland and Northern Ireland marks the next phase of a business development campaign in these key regions. Andrew Wilford, Managing Director – Mobile, Giacom, said: "Tony joins us as we embark on ambitious plans for business development across Scotland and Northern Ireland. These markets present growth opportunities for mobile services and having a local presence is vital to ensuring our partners and their customers are fully supported." Miller joins Giacom on the back of a ten year spell working as Head of Mobile Services for a Scottish-based voice and data provider.



Tony Miller

INFORM Billing's Matt Bodsworth has been promoted to the Head of Operations role. The move builds on his achievements while leading the support, projects and analytics teams. Bodsworth joined Inform Billing in 2016 when he started a four year apprenticeship degree. "Matt has ascended the ranks and is a true product expert, effectively overseeing the most extensive and intricate customer onboarding projects," stated Business Development Director Ellie Allseybrook. "Matt's journey from sixth form to the Head of Operations is a testament to his dedication, perseverance and abilities."

SAM Harper has joined Cardiff-based Evolve IP as a Partner Account Executive with a remit to extend the reach and influence of the firm's voice, contact centre and collaboration solutions. Harper said: "One of the biggest things I've learned is the day-to-day impact this technology has in helping organisations perform at their maximum level."

BUILDING on her progressive ten year spell at distributor ProVu Communications, Anna Maria Marzec-Smith has been promoted to the position of Sales Director. Group Managing Director Darren Garland commented: "I have watched Anna work her way through the company from an order processor to account manager, to sales manager and now to Sales Director. Anna understands the values of our company and more importantly understands the requirements of our customers. She will take this new role in her stride too." Marzec-Smith takes over from Craig Herrett who is now Group Sales Director.



Anna Maria Marzec-Smith

Continued from page 40
cost inflation. Updates with CityFibre, Community Fibre, Netomnia and Zzoomm show that all are stabilising rather than accelerating network build, while seeking efficiencies, with CityFibre now targeting EBITDA breakeven in early 2024 (no mean feat versus 2022 losses of £68.6m on underlying revenues of £80.8m).

The net effect is that the combined build from circa 100 FTTP altnets is probably no more than that of the incumbents BT Openreach and VMO2 combined, while BT's customer take up of 32% of the 11m FTTP premises passed (equally split between BT retail and third party ISPs) is 2-3x higher than that of most altnets who are having to attract new customers rather than upgrade existing ones.

Broadly speaking, the major network players are eking out single digit EBITDA growth on no/low revenue growth, as highlighted in recent June 2023 quarter updates, with

We are also seeing consolidation and change among altnet backers

general trends of mobile holding up better to price rises than fixed services, and B2B better than consumer. BT's pro forma adjusted EBITDA rose 5% to £2.0bn on revenues up 4% to £5.2bn (excludes disposed BT Sport). CPI-linked price rises continued to drive top and bottom line improvements in Consumer and Openreach, though Business profitability (-11%) was impacted by higher cost inputs and legacy support contact run-off.

BT, which subsequently announced current BT NED

and Telia CEO Alison Kirkby as CEO Philip Jansen's (continuity) successor, reaffirmed its FY24 outlook for revenue and EBITDA growth (undisclosed, analysts currently calling for +1% and +2% growth respectively), capex of £5-5.1bn and FCF of £1-1.2bn.

Virgin Media O2 (VMO2) reported revenues up 6% to £2,713m, but up only 1% excluding the impact of the nexfibre construction (FTTP 5m premises build on behalf of the parents and InfraVia), and supported by double digit price rises through the quarter. EBITDA grew by 5% to £1,017m due to price rises, partially offset by increased energy costs. Mobile grew 5% but fixed line (TV, phone and broadband) fell 4% due to 'household spend optimisation'. VMO2 reiterated 2023 guidance (excluding nexfibre) of revenue growth, mid-single digit EBITDA growth (implying circa £4.1bn), and capex of £2bn (-7.5%), releasing £1.8-2bn to the parents Telefonica and Liberty Global.

Vodafone UK continued to be the standout performer among Vodafone's European operations with revenue up 5.7% to 1,684m euros, an acceleration from the prior quarter's 3.8%, supported by inflation-linked price increases, a growing fixed-line customer base and good growth in business. There were no profit numbers in this update, but EBITDA has been tracking revenue growth in the UK. Group guidance is for 'broadly flat' EBITDA and FCF.

This opinion piece focuses on Megabuyte's Telecoms Services peer group comprising 1,038 UK companies and touches on some of the most interesting themes that emerged from April to June 2023, and subsequently. To find out more contact: philip.carse@megabuyte.com n

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Strategic (adj)

Planning activities and actions to achieve long term goals and objectives.

Partnership (noun)

Forming an agreement to work together to achieve mutual interests and benefits.

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