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TalkTalk kicks off major demerger

THE £95m sale of TalkTalk Business Direct to TFP Telecoms and a £25m wholesale deal marks the first phase of the group's plan to demerge its main operating businesses and create independent entities with full autonomy.

SPECIAL REPORT

The demerger also encompasses the B2B Wholesale Platform, which will provide wholesale telecom services; TalkTalk Consumer which boasts 2.4 million residential broadband customers; as well as the sale of TalkTalk Business Direct which provides connectivity to around 90,000 small businesses.

"This transaction delivers growth investment for Business Direct as well as a long-term

revenue agreement for our wholesale platform," commented Group CEO Tristia Harrison (pictured above). "This is an important first step in our demerger plans."

Harrison will chair a new Oversight Board through to the point of legal separation of the remaining two businesses on March 1st 2024. She will then become a non-exec' director of the B2B Wholesale Platform.

Tom O'Hagan, founder of Virtual1 and current MD of

TalkTalk Business Wholesale will become CEO of the Wholesale Platform, while Adam Dunlop, the former MD of iD Mobile and current MD of TalkTalk Consumer and Supply & Partnerships will step up as CEO of TalkTalk Consumer.

The demerger allows each company to focus on their distinctive customer bases, eliminate operational complexity, and support balance sheet refinancing and investment on a standalone basis.

TalkTalk Wholesale Services

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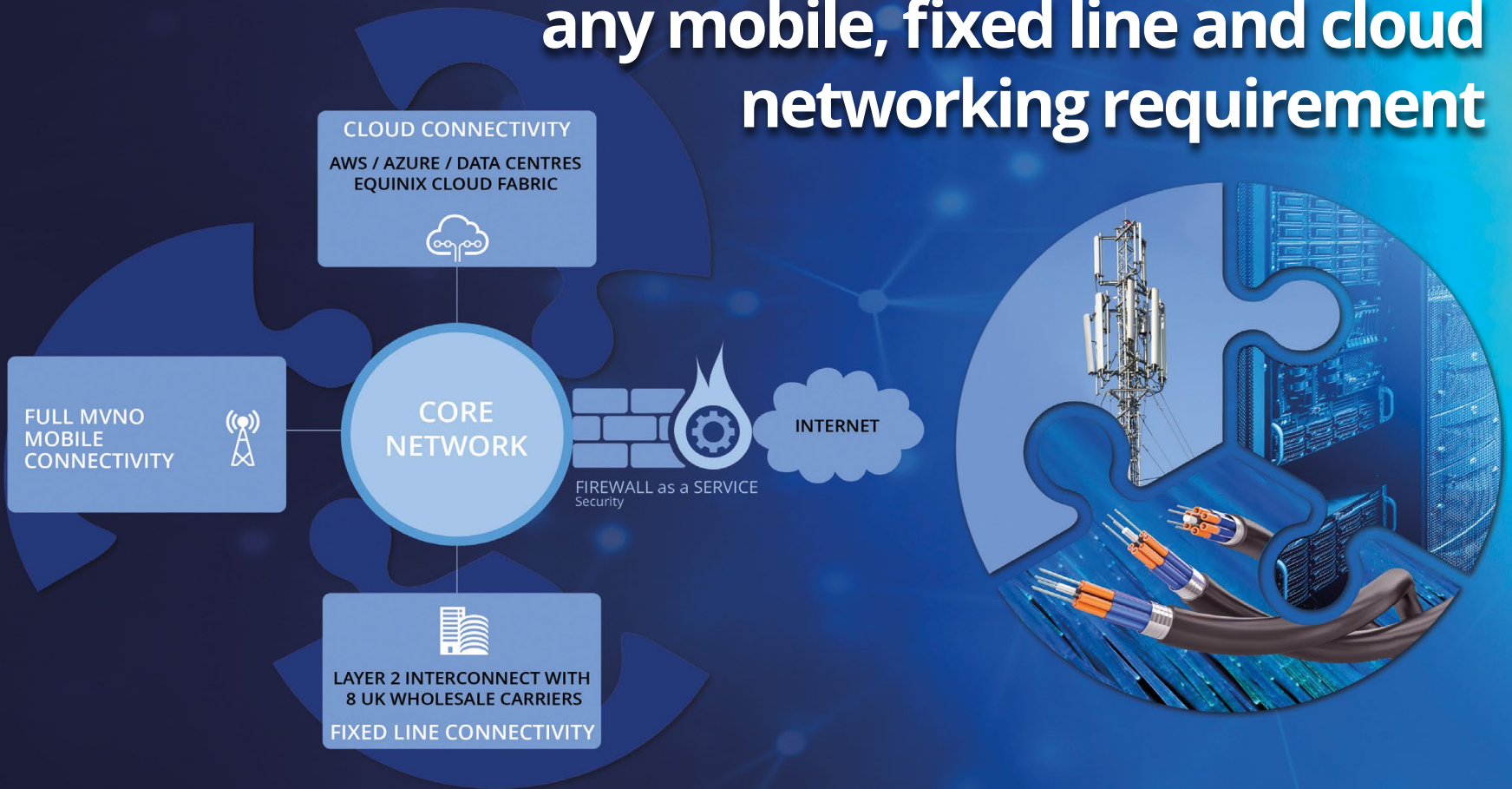
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EDITOR'S COMMENT



Stuart Gilroy

FROM small seeds grow iconic structures like the Sycamore Gap tree in Northumberland mindlessly felled last month. That deserves a prison sentence. What was in their minds as they tramped across the rocky path under a cloak of darkness? These perpetrators

had plenty of time to backtrack and think this is a bad idea. But for them, the chainsaw in their hands represented destiny, with no rational answer as to why.

For the rest of us, it's not an easy scenario to get your head around. And to help our understanding, this dastardly act is largely being rationalised in the form of hope for the future. The tree will bounce back, and ultimately win. All hail the power of nature and optimism.

This boils down to the polarisation of different mindsets – destructive and pessimistic versus constructive and optimistic. Thankfully, the pivotal factor in this dichotomy is that the worse things seem to get the more optimistic we can be, which serves as a springboard.

With the channel's business leaders facing many challenges at the moment, ranging from economic headwinds to skills shortages to keeping pace with a fast moving and transforming market – surely an optimistic mindset that takes full account of what's possible will outstrip anyone clinging to, and blinkered by, a gloomy view of the world.

It is the optimistic among us who will lay down new roots in existing and untrodden territories, explore new partnerships that will deliver fresh opportunities, open their minds to even wider collaborations and become more mindful of self-improvement, while embracing greater purposes.

Those with a brighter outlook will sow new seeds, tap into the power of nature, branch out and allow their optimism to fuel new growth. There really is no solid ground for negativity.

Stuart Gilroy, Editor

SCC invests into digital consultancy



Christine Olmsted

SCC has laid the foundations for its digital transformation services business with a majority investment in Nimble, the 150-head digital engineering consultancy based in Sheffield.

"With SCC's global footprint and our investment in cloud services we had many of the pieces we needed to help clients with digital transformation," commented Christine Olmsted, SCC's Corporate Development Director, who also serves as Nimble's Chief Strategy Officer.

"What we lacked was the front end, a team of consultants who could help customers envi-

sion and articulate their needs and the development and delivery squads to then make that vision a reality. With Nimble on board SCC can become a full scale digital solutions and services provider."

Nimble will operate as a separate company led by CEO Chris Roberts who founded the firm in 2016.

"Partnering with SCC gives us rocket fuel to grow Nimble in the UK and beyond," commented Roberts. See page 22

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NEWS ROUNDUP

RIGBY Technology Investments-backed CloudClevr has built on its foundational NGC Networks investment in June with the acquisition of 4Sight Communications. The deal extends CloudClevr's geographic reach and adds complementary capabilities. 4Sight MD Simon Turner, who continues to run the business, stated: "4Sight has been growing well as a stand-alone business and adding the strength, experience and capabilities of CloudClevr along with the financial backing of Rigby Technology Investments will give us a boost." CloudClevr CEO Steve Harris said: "Adding geographic and technical capabilities was important with this second acquisition."

THE swcomms brand is retiring this month following the Exeter-based business's adoption of the Focus Group moniker. Focus acquired the firm in February 2021 and according to swcomms MD Brian Lodge the renaming signals the official merger with its parent company. "By taking on the Focus Group name we can expand the products and services we offer," he said. Focus now has a combined workforce of over 900 employees across 13 locations.



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NEWS ROUNDUP

INTEGRITY360 has kicked off its latest expansion phase with an eight million euros investment in a Security Operations Centre (SOC) in Dublin and fresh plans to create circa 200 jobs across the group over the coming three years, mainly cyber security consultants. Integrity360 currently employs approximately 100 people in Ireland and 500 group-wide. The Ireland operation is expected to generate 45 million euros this year, contributing significantly to overall forecasted revenues of 115 million euros in 2023.

NUVOLA Distribution's hosted voice portfolio has been extended with the addition of eve Voice from eve Networks. The UK-based UC vendor provides carrier grade hosted voice, data connectivity, SIP, Teams direct routing, business communication, phones, collaboration and cloud-based phone systems. Nuvola Distribution CEO Michael Lloyd commented: "As a British-based organisation eve Networks will appeal to many of our partners. Coupled with its hosted voice offering our partners have more choice to support their clients with a full UC solution."

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Basalt set to merge fibre firms

ONGOING consolidation in the altnet space sees FullFibre and Digital Infrastructure merge to create a single wholesale platform. Both companies are owned by Basalt Infrastructure Partners and the move reflects a ramping up of the investor's ambition in the UK fibre space.

The merger creates a network accessible by over 250,000 homes and businesses ready for service today, with an ambition to deliver one million live premises through a wholesale business model.

The ISP of Digital Infrastructure, BeFibre, which provides retail services via the FullFibre and Digital Infrastructure networks, remains part of the group as a customer of the wholesale platform. The combined business will be led by CEO Oliver Helm who aims to build out in more rural regions.

Helm stated: "We will accelerate our fibre network roll out. The merged organisation will sit in the top tier of well established alternative networks."

Wil Jones, Partner at Basalt, commented: "The UK fibre sector is maturing and, through this merger, we will create a business with substantial scale under a single wholesale platform."

UK foothold strengthened

DUBLIN-based Auxilion's UK expansion campaign is set to enter phase two following a £4m investment in its Managed Services Centre of Excellence in Sheffield, which was launched as part of a wider £15m investment plan.

The expanded Service Operations Centre (SOC) will double the company's UK capacity and has so far this year created 34 new roles. Auxilion forecasts a UK headcount of 160 by the end of 2024.

Its growth strategy includes a planned acquisition and investment in direct sales, marketing and partner channel activities.

CEO Philip Maguire stated: "This isn't just about expanding our physical footprint but investing in new technologies, processes, training, development and creating skilled jobs in the region."

Deirdre McPartlin, Regional Director for the UK & Nordics region, Enterprise Ireland, said: "Auxilion has invested significantly in the north of England leading to strong results including winning a new £8m IT managed services contract to be delivered out of Sheffield. The Auxilion team has ambitious plans to scale their presence



Philip Maguire

in the region and Enterprise Ireland will continue to support their journey."

NEWS ROUNDUP

BDUK CEO Paul Norris is stepping down after a three year spell at the body in charge of delivering the Government's major digital infrastructure programmes. He initially joined as Executive Chair in December 2020 and became Chief Executive and Senior Responsible Owner in April 2021. He is succeeded by Dean Creamer CBE, a graduate of the Government's Major Projects Leadership Academy and Director of the 2022 Commonwealth Games and Blythe House Programme. Creamer also previously led Government programmes to improve digital connectivity in cities as Programme Director for the Super Connected Cities initiative. More new appointments on p38

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PPA ISSN 1366-5243

bpl. A BPL Business Publication

BPL Limited
The Market House, High Street, Uxbridge, Middlesex UB8 1JN
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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)
For subscriptions:
please email info@bpl-business.com

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Barnett seals two purchases



Nigel Barnett

HOME Telecom's plan to hit £38m and service 100,000 properties took a big step forward with the acquisitions of Bloomtel and OpenFibre customers, making seven deals in three years.

Home Telecom supports tenant referencing agencies with the supply of broadband and energy for just the term of the tenancy, meaning that customers are not tied into long-term contracts.

CEO Nigel Barnett stated: "The marketplace has not appreciated that BT has put a stop-sell on all analogue copper lines, so when occupancy changes or tenants want to upgrade their service a new connection to the property is required. This, plus the return of the energy market and the introduction of fibre to the premises, means we can reward agents with a significant additional income again."

Tenth Gamma Ball Rally pulls in £85k

THE tenth Gamma Ball Rally staged last month raised over £85k for Action Through Enterprise and SpecialEffect, taking the overall amount raised across all ten rallies to £800k-plus.

This year's event saw 26 teams start the rally at Chateau de Cocove in Calais before crossing five countries over three days passing through Amsterdam, Zwolle, Hamburg and Copenhagen.

Each team decorated their vehicle according to a theme including circus clowns, The Addams Family, Peaky Blinders, Squid Games, Vikings, Hogwarts and Barbie.

Jaime Williams, Head of Community, Advocacy and Events at Gamma, said: "The rally has always remained true to itself over the years and our



Team Silver Lining in the pink

teams have upped their games with their cars and themes, building a great community spirit among partners, suppliers and colleagues. The money raised is life changing."

Gamma Business MD Daryl Pile commented: "The Gamma Ball Rally is a moment where we join with channel partners

to make a meaningful impact. This has paved the way for enduring, open partnerships that wholeheartedly support charities worldwide."

Sarah Gardner, founder of ATE Ghana (which supports individuals in Lawra with small business grants, access to education and support for those with disabilities), commented: "The Gamma Ball Rally raises huge funds for Action Through Enterprise and SpecialEffect. ATE wouldn't be where we are now if it wasn't for the rally."

Nick Streeter, fundraiser at SpecialEffect, added: "The impact for SpecialEffect and the growing number of people the charity helps with life changing technology is huge."



Team Fidelity get ready to race

NEWS ROUNDUP

ALL 58 staff working at Exertis's warehouse and distribution facility in Raunds could lose their jobs depending on the outcome of a consultation process. The tech distributor is proposing to close the unit next year and move all stock and warehousing activity to its Burnley Bridge warehouse which has benefited from investment in more cost-effective and efficient operational capabilities. Although Exertis says no final decision has been reached the company has put in place plans to introduce a retention bonus and help affected staff with CV writing and interview techniques. Staff could also relocate.

FOCUS Group's third annual golf day, staged at the East Sussex National Golf Resort last month, raised over £53k in aid of Focus Foundation, which raises funds for grassroots charities linked to underprivileged children and young people, mental health initiatives and charitable projects local to Focus Group's regional offices. Chris Goodman, co-founder and Trustee of Focus Foundation, stated: "With so many grant applications waiting to be approved these funds will immediately be put to use to help change people's lives."



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NEWS ROUNDUP

MANAGED ISP Wifinity has acquired Surrey-based Next Connex, which is particularly known for delivering WAN, SD-WAN and Infrastructure-as-a-Service. Wifinity specialises in providing bespoke connectivity solutions to rural and remote locations, including military bases and holiday parks. Wifinity Chief Executive Officer Costas Demetriou commented: "Although we have been working together for many years this acquisition enables us to enhance our product offering and technical expertise." The deal builds on the acquisition of Vital WiFi in July.

CISCO is to acquire cybersecurity giant Splunk in a \$28bn transaction that creates one of the world's largest software companies. A strategic driver for the deal is that together Cisco and Splunk aim to help move organisations from threat detection and response to threat prediction and prevention. The firm also hopes to become a key security and observability player in context of AI. On completion of the deal Splunk President and CEO Gary Steele will join Cisco's executive leadership team reporting to Chair and CEO Chuck Robbins.

Cyber drives more MSP opportunities

KEY insights into current cybersecurity threats (derived from independent research undertaken by Censuwide and commissioned by Integrity360) all point to a growing opportunity for MSPs to give organisations the security services they need.

Of the 205 IT security bosses questioned for the survey (which took place in August) 89% reported an increase in the volume of security alerts over the past 12 months.

And over half of respondents (55%) cited data theft as their biggest concern, with ransomware taking third place (29%) after phishing (35%).

"Businesses are navigating a digital landscape fraught with risks and data theft is clearly weighing heavy on the minds of those tasked with keeping it safe," stated Brian Martin, Head of Product Development, Innovation and Strategy, Integrity360.

"While the threats continue to increase, and the alerts rise alongside, so too does the pressure on those tasked with keeping business data secure.

"Enlisting the help of a Managed Security Services Provider can benefit businesses with the expertise, resources



Brian Martin

and round-the-clock vigilance needed to protect sensitive data and respond effectively and efficiently to incidents, affording security teams the opportunity to apply their time and resources to other priorities."

Martin noted that IT environments have become increasingly complex with many enterprises now employing multi-cloud strategies and multiple products, which can leave gaps in security and see businesses paying for underutilised and overlapping tools unnecessarily.

"Consolidation of cybersecurity architectures can strengthen risk posture, reduce the number of tools and vendors in place, eliminating silos, reducing costs and improving overall security posture," he added.

The report also noted that budget restraints are challenging cybersecurity incident response. "Insufficient budgets can leave organisations vulnerable to attack," added Martin.

"Businesses need to prioritise cybersecurity spend to avoid the financial and reputational ramifications that will often outweigh any initial investment in cybersecurity tools and processes.

"Likewise, responding quickly is vital in the wake of a cybersecurity incident and investing in IR services, training and expertise can make all the difference when responding to a breach or serious incident."

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NEWS ROUNDUP

DONCASTER-based Connectus has added capabilities in Azure Virtual Desktop, Teams Phone and outsourced CTO services with the acquisition of Manchester located Mango Tech. The deal is Connectus' third overall and its first since finalising a funding package with Time Finance. Prior transactions include YouCloud IT in April 2021 and Cybersity in late 2018. Mango Tech was established in 2012 by its MD Greg Buchanan who becomes Connectus' Technical Director. Connectus CEO Roy Shelton said: "This deal enhances our engineering and technical skills and will help swell our customer base."

AKIXI has invested in and merged with CRM integration firm Mondago in a move that sees Andrew Reilly become CEO of the combined business. He has a strong track record in mergers, acquisitions and business integration. The collaboration aims to strengthen value added services around cloud comms platforms. This includes innovation, especially in the linkage of contextual information with engagement analytics. "We will deliver a richer set of capabilities to service providers with a common provisioning model, accelerating time to market," stated Reilly.

Channel Forecast: How are Next Generation Networks creating new opportunities for the channel?

The comms sector is undergoing a transformational period of growth and disruption and the rise of Next Generation Networks is at the forefront of these exciting changes. In this Channel Forecast Insight Session we explore the key aspects of this burgeoning market and how best resellers can tap into the opportunities on offer.

Look out for coverage from this editorial debate in the December issue of Comms Dealer magazine and via our series of 'video shorts' on the key questions addressed on Linked-in.

Join the debate!

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

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Rise of new fund model

SINCE launching a new subscription funding model to the channel earlier this year BPB APM has secured over £10m worth of facilities for resellers, with Director Dan Proctor forecasting a rise to £20-£30m by the end of its first year trading.

The new model enables channel organisations to underpin cashflow and move further and faster on their growth ambitions. It has so far secured facilities for resellers ranging from £250,000 up to £1.2m.

According to Proctor, the product has completed its first launch phase, with sales activity expected to ramp up towards the end of the year.

“It was important to have some time in the market where we could learn and understand the needs of our partners,” he said. “We have found so far that resellers are utilising the model in a mixture of ways.”

Early adopters currently fit into three main types of users, according to Proctor. Those looking to raise big chunks of cash, those looking to move away from their dependency on leasing, and those looking to construct commercial structures where leasing wouldn't have been an option in the first place.

Proctor said: “In the first instance, resellers have been using this to raise cash against the assets already in the business, without having to give away onerous securities as there are no security requirements that go with this.”

The most common adopters belong to this second group, with the majority of B2B APM's pipeline having been aware of leasing in the past. Proctor emphasised that this model isn't a direct replacement for leasing and both models can co-exist.

Proctor added: “Partners are using this product as part of their commercial structures, as a way of taking their products to market on a managed service or



Dan Proctor

MRR basis. This prevents them having to wait 18 months into the contract to just break even.”

On this front, B2B APM has partnered with Hexa Finance which will support customers that still have a leasing requirement within their businesses.

“There are big opportunities with resellers looking to use this to form part of a commercial structure,” explained Proctor. “For example, they may have a three year managed service contract with a client, but they are including 12 month subscriptions. This is particularly prevalent in cybersecurity contracts.

“Our solution is suitable as a leasing company cannot finance three years if you're only giving 12-month licences at a time.”

Proctor noted that during the early launch period objections sometimes arose due to perceptions of financing and the need to disclose the financing agreement to customers.

“Some resellers say, ‘we don't want anything that will be disclosed to our customers because they may think we're in financial trouble’,” said Proctor. “I understand why resellers think that way, but every financial decision maker should be looking at what they can do to maximise liquidity within their own businesses.

“If you're telling people that you're taking decisions today to mitigate risk in the business and to maximise liquidity, how can any customer see that as anything but a positive move?”

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The Big Goal signs Sky

Sky Business Wholesale is the latest tech giant to sign up to The Big Goal, which was officially launched at St George's Park – the home of England football – on October 4th. Sky's channel business joins a growing list of industry companies that have committed to the initiative, centred around the Street Soccer Foundation which, via its national academies, changes lives through football by training, inspiring, and mentoring homeless young people and, in many cases, helping them achieve gainful employment.

"We are ecstatic to have Sky Business Wholesale supporting this outstanding industry initiative. Having them on board alongside many other companies is fantastic news and the influence and exposure they can provide is a great boost for the project," said Giacom CEO Tez O'Brien. "As



an example, Sky brought the Premiership Trophy to the launch which provided tremendous photo opportunities. They've also teamed up Sky Sports News to produce a news video which has elevated the project to a new level."

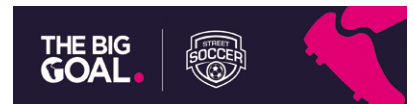
Giacom has put its entire marketing team behind the project which

aims to recruit 100 ICT businesses as founder members. "This is a wonderful initiative that our amazing UK Tech Channel can unite together to support," said O'Brien. "There are 1,600 holes in a regulation football net, so the overall aim of The Big Goal is to prevent 1,600 young people from drifting into homelessness."

At the launch, attended by 70-plus industry leaders, Comms Dealer Editorial Director Nigel Sergent quizzed O'Brien and Street Soccer CEO Keith Mabbutt about the aims and objectives of The Big Goal. They explained how sponsoring companies can enter a five-a-side team and progress to a national finals event at St George's Park next summer.

"This is just the fun and competitive element. The key part is the entry fee which will support a Street Soccer Foundation Academy local to them - thereby helping 10 homeless young adults get their lives back on track," added O'Brien.

ICT businesses keen to enter a team and/or sponsor an academy should email Keith Mabbutt at kcm@streetsoccerfoundation.org.uk



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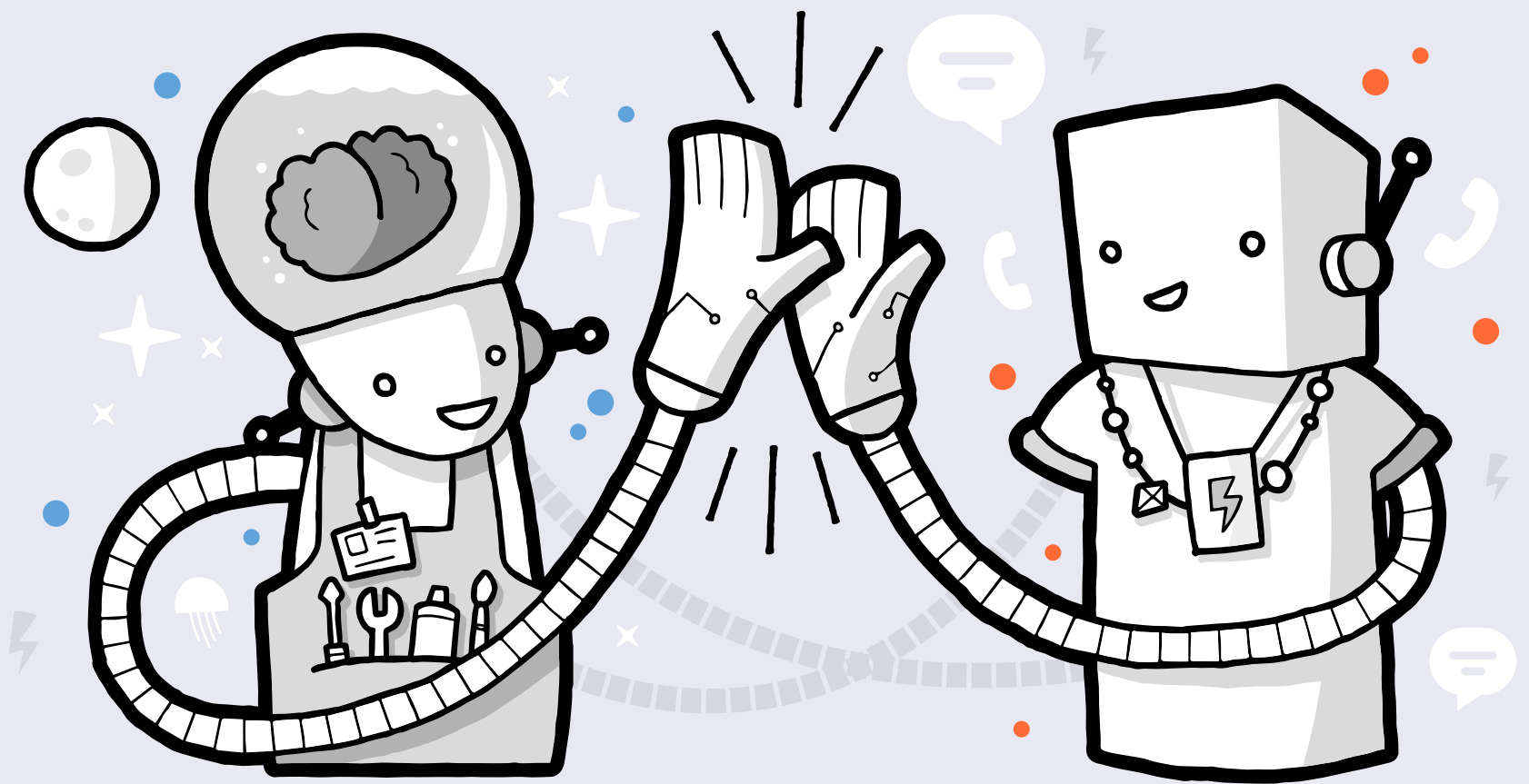
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Five minutes with...

Alan Riddoch, Managing Director, Agility Communications

Following a merger with The Mailing Room late last year Riddoch says he is on track to create the leading franking machine and telephony supplier in the UK.



Alan Riddoch

What was your route into the comms sector?
I fell into comms in 2013: I had a job offer in London working in the City, but my girlfriend (now wife) didn't want to move down south so I swung my attention on the technology sales space as I was interested in tech and landed at EE as the youngest Senior Business Manager the company has ever recruited at 21 years of age. I have always had an entrepreneurial mindset and come from a strong business background working for family firms and also running my own e-commerce stores from the age of 13.

What catalysed your decision to establish Agility Comms?
My entrepreneurial drive and passion for technology led me to starting Agility in 2017. I founded the company following a frustrating experience working in the large corporate space and witnessing low levels of account management. I knew Agility could do better. We then niched down in three core areas, focusing on business mobile, VoIP and connectivity.

Why did you partner with The Mailing Room?
In November 2022 we merged with The Mailing Room (TMR) to create a

new business for franking and telecoms services. The venture presents significant cross-sell opportunities for both businesses.

Longer term, the strategic goal is to provide our products and services to the base of 7,000 customers at TMR through our digital transformation agenda. TMR is able to increase its product portfolio, offering increased value to customers which will in turn aid customer retention across the group.

What integration challenges have you faced?
Navigating the acquisition process is nothing new for The Mailing Room, having acquired six operations since 2015, successfully bringing each into the fold to develop new internal expertise. These initiatives have enabled TMR to develop into the UK's leading independent supplier of mailroom technology. Staff numbers are due to double this year, turnover is set to increase by 50 per cent with a focus on delivering our enterprise telephony, Agility Voice, to the customer base.

What other factors are shaping your market approach?
Daily changes are shaping Agility. In terms of market approach, we leverage multiple methods of digital and traditional marketing

and use software to analyse what works and what doesn't, which allows us to make changes quicker.

Which new technology areas are on your radar screen?
AI will transform many businesses across the world. I believe using AI technology with telephony will be a game changer in the next five years.

What trends are you tracking that interest you most?
We see market competition increase on a yearly basis, so offering value to the customer in terms of additional products and services bundled into our solutions will be key to customer acquisition and retention.

What is your biggest opportunity?
Partnering with The Mailing Room, the largest independent franking machine supplier in the UK.

What is your biggest career achievement?
Starting Agility Comms with a laptop and phone from a coffee shop in Formby.

In hindsight, what would you have done differently?
Left the corporate world a lot sooner to start growing businesses.

Role models
My dad who gave me the advice and confidence to pursue business; and Michael Jordan for his mental strength.

Three ideal dinner guests
Robert Kiyosaki, Bill Shankly and Michael Jordan. They are all winners.

We are your strengths, and what could you work on?
My greatest strength is my drive, enthusiasm and persistence. I never give in. But I have been working on the art of delegation for some time. There is still work to be done.

What are today's leadership priorities?
Embracing change: An example would be working arrangements. We support remote working as it encourages staff retention, better work-life balance and increased productivity.

Tell us something about yourself we don't know
I broke my femur playing football when I was seven.

Best piece of advice you have been given?
You have two ears and one mouth, use them in that proportion.

If you weren't in IT what would you be doing?
I'd have pursued a career in the city or worked in the property sector full-time.

What's the biggest risk you have taken?
Leaving my enterprise role and setting up Agility. I always felt that I needed to be involved in the creation of businesses. This will never change.

How do you relax when not working?
Typically, I try and keep myself fit by playing football, going to the gym and going to Anfield (not so relaxing this season).

Top tip for resellers
Without a great team it will be hard to achieve your objectives. So recruit the right people with the right fit for your vision and goals. The rest will take care of itself. ■



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Trends in marketing

Pivotal trends in marketing fall into two main categories – differentiation and innovating the customer experience, according to Hilary Oliver, Chief Marketing & Experience Officer, Tolling.

Oliver's first position as a company director was with a start-up SAP reseller which failed after 18 months of trading due to poor cash flow management. "But it was a great learning experience to understand all aspects of business," stated Oliver, who currently sits on the Tollring board and the product strategy committee and manages marketing communications, product marketing, customer success and HR teams. "I'm very operational and involved in most company-wide projects," she added. "A passion of mine is the customer experience which is one reason why the User Acceptance Testing remit sits within our product marketing team."

Tolling is forecasting 35 per cent CAGR this financial year, and the next, with growth primarily coming from new product development. "Technology is evolving quicker than ever before and the partner landscape is evolving too," commented Oliver. "Partners strive to differentiate and analytics are becoming more critical, so we are advancing our propositions to cater for the way technology and working

practices are changing. Product simplification and relevance are critical because user experience impacts CX through product UI, along with our communication, messaging and marketing programmes."

Oliver noted that marketing has evolved and will continue to develop as teams leverage technology such as ChatGPT and AI. "While still in their infancy these tools will not only improve the speed that people can answer questions or gain an understanding on a new topic, but also give them greater insight when targeting different markets or vertical sectors," she explained.

According to Oliver, differentiation remains one of the biggest challenges facing marketing teams in the IT and comms channel. "Business strategies need to be clear and well-communicated to drive simplification of marketing messaging in this fast evolving hi-tech industry, and marketing teams need to be prepared to innovate for a new generation of customer," she stated.

"ChatGPT and AI mean no more blank pages and



Hilary Oliver

Marketing teams need to be prepared to innovate for a new generation of customer

an excellent starting point. As tools, they still require senior oversight to ensure any resulting text is correct, but someone without the fundamental knowledge and armed with the right brief can certainly get a leg-up. I believe their impact will be significant and elevate the work being done to a more sophisticated place."

As a woman working in the comms sector Oliver's experiences have been positive; and she says there

are more women in the industry compared to 10 years ago and expects this trend to continue. "I have never felt that being female had a negative impact on my role," she stated.

"The tech sector is fast moving so you need the right people regardless of gender who love technology and have the drive to evolve with the industry. It is more of a challenge for women in larger businesses where there is less understanding

of family commitments, less flexibility in hybrid working and a smaller talent pool of women as a result."

This relates to Oliver's own past experience: With two children in nursery it was hard for her to find new work because of the cost of childcare needed to cover non-billable prospecting when working as a freelancer. "A part-time marketing job at Tollring came up on a 'working mums' website and I knew the job advertised was an exact match of what I was looking for," stated Oliver. "It was the only job I applied for and was to become my next position on the board."

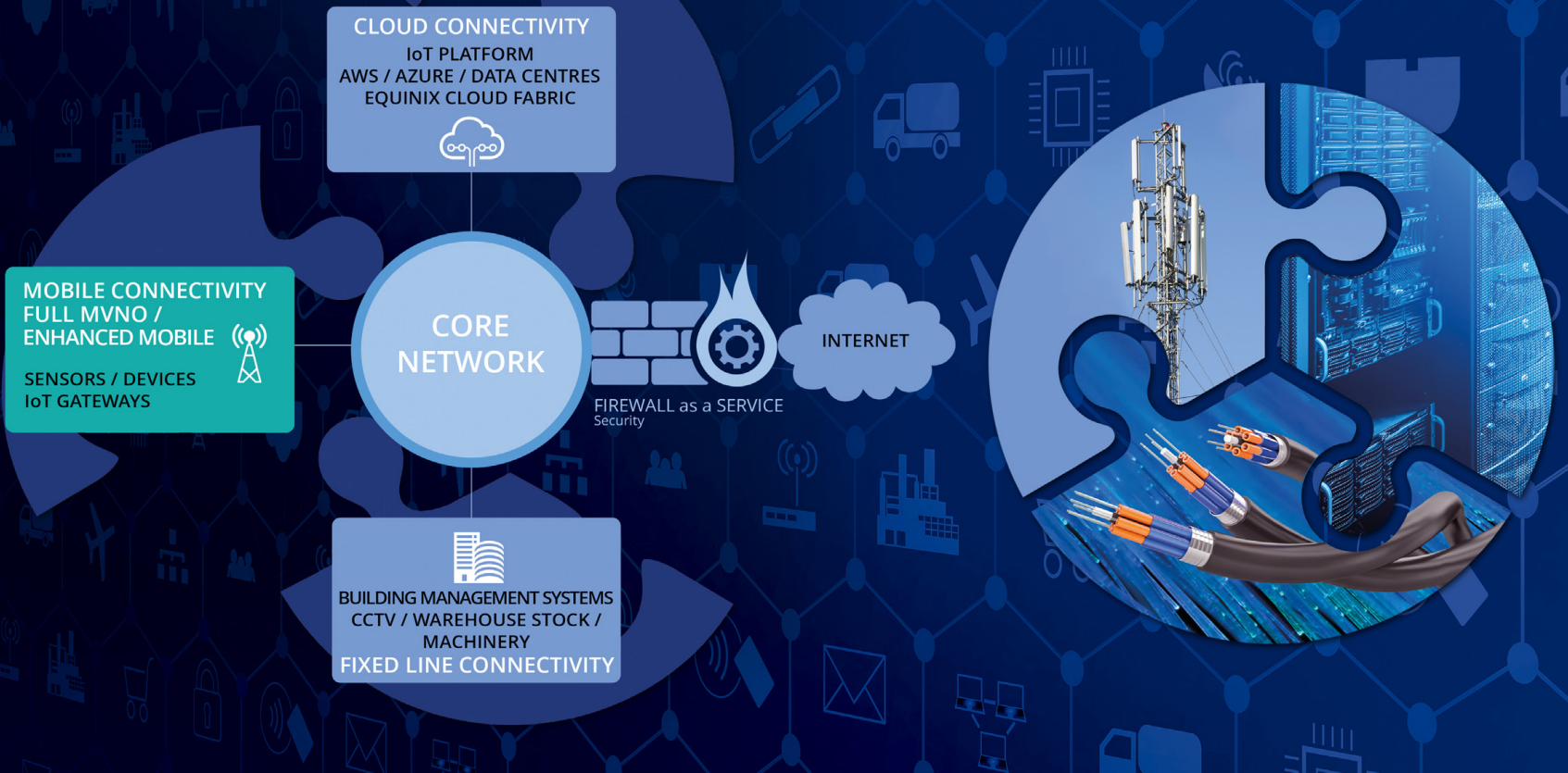
Oliver began her career as a marketing assistant (having completed a European Marketing degree and CIM diploma in marketing) and worked her way up the ranks in tech related companies, including a distributor of barcoding peripherals, mobile data events, a communications network provider and the aforementioned SAP consultancy.

"I opted to go freelance which enabled me to start a family and continue working while managing my own diary," added Oliver. "Marketing experience aside, the most valuable of my previous experiences was freelancing where I had to package up my proposition, manage my own accounts, find work, win the work, fulfil the work, bill the work, and build relationships while adding value in what was always a dispensable role. Working in every role as a freelancer gave me valuable insight and greater consideration of what makes a business tick." ■



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Matrix IT ramps up

Incoming Matrix IT Managing Director Matt Faulkner has activated a solid business plan first conceived when he joined the Fareham-based MSP as CTO in 2021. Here, he sets out his growth vision and how he aims to realise his strategic goals.

Faulkner's strong pedigree as an IT leader is a perfect match for Matrix IT which provides a broad scope of tailored support services ranging from ad-hoc offerings through to permanent on-site IT support. The company delivers design and implementation services and engages with a variety of customers across different sectors, from farming and leisure to solicitors and accountancy firms. Faulkner says the business has been particularly successful in the recruitment, legal and professional services sectors over the past two years.

"We will continue to build on our foundations of strong IT delivery by understanding technological advances and adding value to our customers through close consultancy, based on the specific needs of each customer's IT requirements," commented Faulkner. "To achieve this we discuss their IT concerns and business objectives, identify the best-in-class technologies to support their IT infrastructure and

ensure a risk-free transition that's secure and scalable."

Faulkner's strategic vision began to take shape soon after he joined Matrix IT as technology chief just over two years ago. A succession plan was initiated and during this 24 month period the company doubled in size and grew to a team of 50. Now as Managing Director, Faulkner will leverage his experience to the max, especially having witnessed and absorbed the impact of ten-fold growth on a company's culture, communication and working processes. These lessons are reflected in his current planning and approach to both challenges and opportunities.

"Matrix IT has a clear plan for growth but it is important to ensure the right structure is in place to support our activities," he explained. "When you are part of a growing business inevitably there are details that you can't fully anticipate. To have been through these experiences has been beneficial in



Matt Faulkner

We all run our businesses based on information, and the more data we are able to evaluate means that we can make better decisions

helping Matrix IT get ahead of potential barriers and accelerate our progress."

Culture matters

Key to greasing the wheels of growth is maintaining culture, believes Faulkner, who puts much stock on company values and how they can define a firm's DNA while being a USP. "We maintain our culture in several ways," he stated. "We look for individuals with the same shared sense of team spirit and focus on service delivery. We recruit people for their attitude, and we have a fantastic

training programme which can fill gaps in experience."

Faulkner is also focused on improving Matrix IT's systems with a view to gaining better insights into key management information. "We all run our businesses based on information, and the more data we are able to evaluate means that we can make better and more informed decisions," he added.

"The technologies we use internally are rich with data and our focus this year has been on enabling

our teams to visualise that information to aid the decision making process."

Another priority is to continually review emerging technologies and understand their market potential in order to educate staff and customers, and evolve the company's products and services portfolio in line with the pace of innovation. "The benefit to our customers is to fully align current and future IT services with the wider aims of the business," commented Faulkner.

"By taking this approach we can help customers prioritise the technologies that will have a meaningful impact on their organisations and put them on the right technology path for the next three to five years. Customers appreciate our flexibility and ability to provide services that align with their IT needs." ■



Keep the tortoise in mind because the race to 2025 isn't over yet

As the Channel approaches the 2025 Switch Off, many will be understandably pushing customers to upgrade sooner rather than later – which is a good thing.

However, it's important to consider Aesop's fable, remember why the tortoise wins, and consider that a patient strategy – one that doesn't hurry customers to make the switch – has its merits, too.

Now that we're past the Stop Sell deadline, Partners and end-customers will soon start to realise that traditional broadband products – PSTN, ADSL, data-only fibre to the cabinet products etc. – can no longer be ordered (with the exception of TalkTalk's MPF technologies), which may significantly impact Channel growth strategies and end-customers scaling their services.

"The Stop Sell will have certainly led to panic in some sales teams, experiencing the real-world impact of the Switch Off for the first time as they try to place an order while systems, portals, APIs and checkers simply won't allow them." Paul Smith, Chief Sales Officer, TalkTalk Wholesale Services

The clock is now ticking towards the next significant (and final) milestone – December 31st, 2025 – when businesses will need to have their future-proof connectivity in place before those circuits

are deactivated for good.

This massive commercial opportunity has been discussed at great length in the Channel and some resellers are ahead of the game, converting their bases as we speak. However, others are finding that customers just don't need FTTP for the time being. They don't want to convert to IP voice either and that's not necessarily a bad thing, especially when TalkTalk Wholesale Services Partners don't have to.

"It's not always a quick process. End customers are focused on running their business, keeping customers happy and the operation profitable. They're not necessarily considering if the technology is working for them, as it's not their key priority unless something isn't working." Smith

Given TalkTalk Wholesale Services' private Backhaul and fully unbundled MPF lines, these products are still available to the Channel for years to come. Ultimately though, one day customers will require FTTP and IP-Voice services to stay connected, but not until Full Fibre is more widely available throughout the UK, which will take a considerable amount of time.



Paul Smith

"The Stop Sell will have certainly led to panic in some sales teams, experiencing the real-world impact of the Switch Off for the first time..."

Paul Smith, Chief Sales Officer, TalkTalk Wholesale Services

Customers may also have concerns around price – whether an FTTP connection offers greater value for money, the complexity of switching now and upgrading voice services simultaneously – or one of so many other challenges that mean now isn't the right time.

"Pressuring customers to invest in new services, especially when the cost of doing business is soaring is counterintuitive. From the customer's perspective, forcing what they believe is unnecessary change may push them away to other providers instead of building trust." Smith

The danger here is bombarding customers with the push to upgrade, frustrating them to the point where they look elsewhere – and that's not a scenario any reseller wants to feel forced into because there's simply no other option.

So, why rush end customers?

They should have the choice of going down the Full Fibre/ SoGEA + IP-voice route now, or MPF for the time being until they have a more pressing desire to invest in the switch.

And it's not just end-customers that can benefit from taking a slower pace...

"Our Partners are breathing a sigh of relief now they have another option that they didn't realise was available. Plus, it's not taking that drive towards FTTP away; it's just delaying until it's right for the Partner and the customer." Smith

Having an alternative to FTTP has been a massive benefit for some resellers. It takes a long time to make such a significant change to an entire customer base and can be incredibly resource-heavy to upgrade customers en masse – from marketing to deployment, there are a lot of steps - the rollout plans for the partner may

be too expensive right now, or they're unable to move quick enough.

"It's worth reminding ourselves that the tortoise wins the race in Aesop's classic fable. There's no use hurrying customers when a more considered and patient approach can stand resellers in far better stead in the coming years.

Just keep the benefits clear and concise while staying away from fostering any fearmongering or overpromising. Ensure they know when the deadline is, and they understand that, as we approach 2025, the greater demand will be which will potentially cause delays." Smith

If you want to know more about Stop-Sell-proof MPF connectivity from TalkTalk Wholesale Services, contact your Account Manager or visit <https://wholesale.talktalk.co.uk/working-with-us> to learn more.

How Cantwell plans to e

Private equity investor Chiltern Capital's acquisition of IT distributor Intec Microsystems in July heralded the arrival of industry veteran Alan Cantwell as Executive Chairman to accelerate growth beyond £100 million-plus revenues within 12 months. Here, Cantwell (who has worked in the IT distribution channel for more than 40 years) provides insights into his strategy, his past experience and what it takes to be an effective Chairperson.

How did you arrive at Intec Microsystems?

I have built a network of private equity contacts and since 2012 successfully advised and delivered several exits for clients, allowing businesses to flourish under new management or private equity ownership. I have known and admired Intec Microsystems since it started and always felt it had huge untapped potential. We don't want to be the best kept secret anymore. We work with challenger vendors and we're moving up the value chain. With the addition of new vendors and a revitalised sales and marketing strategy Intec Microsystems intends

to boost its current 2,500 customer base by targeting the 8,000 VARs operating in the UK. Our management team and staff have the knowledge and expertise for growth. We'll fill any gaps in the business by recruiting more expertise and with the investment we now have we can afford to be more competitive in the market.

What immediate challenges are you currently addressing?

Initially, my challenge is to ensure that the reseller network in the UK understands the capabilities of Intec Microsystems. We are now engaging with the media outlets explaining our



Alan Cantwell

We don't want to be the best kept secret anymore. We work with challenger vendors and we're moving up the value chain

story and embarking on a series of digital advertising campaigns. Naturally, when our reseller engagements increase I need to ensure the business has the scale to deal with the capacity.

How do you think you personally can best impact the business as Chair?

My role is to help the company deliver a plan and be strategic, and I have always adopted a principle

of lead by example. There isn't any job that I won't do myself. Applying that principle and being strategic is a recipe for growth. And my background in building IT companies from scratch

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helps me establish trust and loyalty from my team.

Tell us more about the experiences you draw on?

I was originally a salesman in the early 1980s, which was the start of the modern day IT evolution. In 1984 I joined a start-up called Team Systems as employee number two (unfortunately

Women board members bring diverse points of view, so it's imperative to keep diversity and inclusion on the agenda. As Chairperson, one of the initiatives is to challenge the business on its sustainability policy and investigate the benefits of B Corp Certification, for example, and work out if that's right for the organisation.

A role of the Chairperson is to ensure the board is diverse, including minorities

not a shareholder), which went on to become the top Olivetti dealer in the UK and top Altos Unix based Multisoft systems house, later sold to Sage. I then spent four years learning the pitfalls and opportunities involved in starting and growing an IT company, helping the business reach over £15 million revenue in four years and selling to Mysis the year after I left.

In 1988 I founded Selection Services, initially as an IT break-fix support company. During the 1990s we grew to become one of the first managed service providers focusing on SME clients with 50-250 IT users. With a team over 350 technical support staff in 2011 and a global client base I sold Selection Services to Palatine Private Equity and my management team at the end of 2011.

What is the role of the Chairperson in fostering D&I and sustainability?

The role of the Chairperson is to ensure the board itself is diverse, including minorities.

What's your key piece of advice to management?

Enjoy your career and help people you work with on that journey. It will pay back for the business.

What is the most difficult part of being a Chairperson?

Not becoming a micro manager.

How do you continue your own professional development?

I take each project and do my very best, then move on to the next project.

What market trends currently interest you most?

Creating a digital business allows me to plan for significant growth. AI and the digital economy require a fresh perspective to bring about change and create new opportunities.

What are today's primary leadership priorities?

Diversity and sustainability.

Are you currently balancing competing priorities?

At this stage in my life I can mainly focus on business, as the family is now at point where they can take care of themselves.

What is your boardroom pet hate?

Boardrooms filled with talk and no action.

Role model

My father, he was a hard working and honest entrepreneur.

What talent do you wish you had?

To travel in time.

What do you fear the most?

Running out of time to achieve my life goals.

Tell us something about yourself we don't know

I prefer to fly alone or with my French Bulldog Jasper, humans are far too slow.

Name three ideal dinner guests

Elvis Presley, Winston Churchill and Nelson Mandela.

What are your greatest strengths, and what could you 'work on'?

My main strength is empathy, but I need to work on developing filters.

Best piece of advice you have been given?

Shut the door and trust your team.

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

I always wanted to be a barrister.

What's the biggest risk you have taken?

I enjoy extreme sports, but don't actually see them as risks.

Top tip for business leaders

Enjoy the company you are building and always help your team to enjoy the journey with you. ■



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Embrace neurodiversity

Building on last month's front cover story and Channel Forecast insight session Support to Win CEO Julie Mills discusses ways to help neurodiverse colleagues 'fit in' and thrive.

Thankfully, gone are the days of discriminating against people for their skin colour, social background or sexuality. We all accept that discrimination is generally rooted in ignorance and fear – so we need to get real about the continuing lack of inclusivity for neurodiverse (ND) people because of a lack of understanding.

When a job interviewee displays odd behavioural traits, or someone in your team struggles in social situations or a noisy co-working space, it may be off-putting because it doesn't seem 'normal'. But that perception has nothing to do with these people being able to do their work. So education for business leaders is key, especially around what it takes to create an ND-friendly workplace.

Trust me, it's worth it because there are significant benefits, including a massively greater talent pool – but only if you know how to access and harness it. A positive mindset focused on business benefits (rather than just human equality) is far more likely to enable success with ND

because it commits you to making cultural change. This, and leadership from the top, is essential to confronting the stigma of neurodiversity – which is the biggest barrier to progress on this issue.

Overcoming stigma

The vast majority of neurodivergent people in the workplace feel enormous stigma. They know they're different and have to conform. They recognise that their diagnosis (if they have one) will probably be used against them as an obstacle to career progress. So they do what any sensible person would do and keep it as secret as possible, always in fear of being negatively perceived by others.

You've got to do everything possible to remove this stigma and allow ND people to show their true selves – starting with how you interview people, right the way through to day-to-day people management and professional development. If you don't, then all the other changes you make will be ineffective.

Having launched our ND initiative at the start of 2023 we were thrilled when three



Julie Mills

The vast majority of neurodivergent people in the workplace feel enormous stigma. You've got to do everything possible to remove this stigma and allow neurodiverse people to show their true selves

of our staff felt confident enough to come forward to share their neurodiversity with the rest of the team. For Georgia, who'd only recently joined us, it was a life changing event. In fact, it was the first opportunity

she'd had to 'own up' to an employer after years of unhappily concealing her ND behaviours. For Joel, it was the encouragement he needed to get his neurodiversity diagnosed and supported.

This was also the catalyst for understanding each person's individual requirements, because addressing the needs of neurodiverse people is not a one-size-fits-all fix. As a management team we found that, after just a little of our own research, some comparatively small adjustments to working practices would make a huge difference.

Simple changes

For some people, it's a visual scorecard for work prioritisation which is used to drive the agenda at check-in meetings with their line manager. This simple and inexpensive change has transformed productivity for one of our employees. For others, it's literally a case of putting up guardrails to stop them being too productive and burning themselves out in areas that don't require so much focus.

We've also introduced other changes that aren't specific to individuals, like do not disturb protocols and provision of noise-cancelling headphones. Plus all our staff have a new attitude to after-work social events, accepting that some people won't come if it's not their thing and not having that stigmatise them.

Once you've removed the stigma and made it a safe space to be open about neurodiversity, you'll discover how much happier it makes people. I mean the whole team, not just those directly affected. It's an education process for your neurotypical employees too, and we found our ND employees are happy to share and be vocal about their experiences in a very positive, often funny and joyful way. ■



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High optimism defines SCC

SCC's newly opened Scottish office is the precursor of a significant expansion campaign across the region led by SCC long-termer Lindsey Hunter, Branch Manager for Scotland, Northern Ireland and the North East. Here, she opens up on her big ambition to unlock the full potential of this burgeoning country while rethinking customer and partner engagement, driving staff development and being at the vanguard of digital technologies.



Lindsey Hunter

SCC generates circa £38 million revenues in Scotland and opened its first Scottish office in Glasgow in 1986. It currently employs 44 people north of the border and has invested over £100k in its new Scottish headquarters, located at Interchange Business Park in Livingston. The move is expected to create dozens of new jobs as the company targets 20 per cent regional growth this year and 40 per cent growth over the coming five years. "The opportunity to develop this business is huge, particularly given SCC's investment in digital technologies," stated Hunter. "In the short-term I want

to make sure we hit our ambitious growth targets for the year and build new areas of customer engagement. Long-term, we will continue on that growth journey and embrace SCC's vision to become a leader in digital transformation services."

Hunter cited research that forecasts the Scottish software and IT industry to grow 38 per cent by 2024. At the same time, the Scottish economy is expected to expand during 2024 and 2025, albeit at a slower rate than in previous years. "Technology and digital transformation will play a huge part in this growth and companies that

Once I got my mojo and the support I needed I've had the confidence to reach for the stars. Now I mentor some of our younger ladies and that's been a rewarding experience

invest in transformation and innovation will be at the forefront," commented Hunter.

"As a privately owned family run business SCC has the ability to spot trends early and invest ahead of the curve. That's what we're doing and will continue to do. I expect to see SCC in Scotland secure a significantly larger presence in the public and commercial sectors as a

true digital transformation partner to customers."

Strong influence

SCC has a broad presence in the Scottish public sector, most notably in NHS Scotland where it has exerted a strong influence for more than 20 years, as well as in education and emergency services. The company also has a strong commercial portfolio supporting mid-market businesses in the legal

and professional, energy, transport, manufacturing, utilities and FS&I sectors.

More broadly, last year SCC launched a £300 million technology investment programme to underpin its growth, targeting purchases in a multi-year strategy aimed at consolidating the company's position as Europe's largest private investor in technology. This money was fronted in the

SCC's Scots push

form of £200 million of equity and £100 million of debt from the Rigby Group in November last year. "SCC is a top five European IT reseller and the 12th largest reseller in the world," claimed Hunter. "We aim to maintain and build on this position. SCC is investing in Scotland and our people and customers, and I want to build a renewed identity for the team as well as review our procurement strategy to ensure we continue to work effectively with our vendor partners. We will invest in high growth sectors such as hyperscale, cybersecurity and digital services to ensure that SCC's growth is at, or above, growth levels in the sectors we choose to be involved in."

Key investment

Hunter further underlined her point by citing SCC's key investment in Nimble, part of its Digital Solutions and Services Provider (DSSP) strategy which covers the whole digital transformation journey and focuses on helping customers with the complete story. "I expect to see great growth in this area," added Hunter. "It is particularly relevant in the public sector as organisations look to address legacy app estates that can hold them back from responding quickly to changing service demands and different ways of working. I also expect to see our commercial business to grow in Scotland, with a renewed focus on emerging markets."

Hunter has built a reputation within SCC and among customers and partners as being an excellent Account Manager. She hopes to pass on her skills by working closely with her team and coaching them, also

leveraging her knowledge of SCC having worked for the company for almost 22 years. During this time she made her way up through various roles in admin, internal sales, business development and account management, learning how each role adds value to the business and customers. "My experience has helped me understand how to get things done at all stages," she stated. "I've always been a conscientious, empathetic, organised person, who just likes being and working with people. That's helped me to build a good network and support both internally and externally throughout my working and personal life."

Hunter first entered the IT space when working in the project office for IBM during her third and fourth years at university. The company was handling the managed outsource of HBOS at the time and her attention was grabbed by the ever-changing, fast-moving pace of the IT industry. But to accelerate her own career pathway Hunter needed to overcome deep rooted challenges linked to anxieties and a lack of self-belief when she was younger.

"I remember James Rigby, our EMEA CEO, saying to me, 'the only thing holding you back is your own self-belief', and he was right," recalled Hunter. "Once I got my mojo and all the support I needed from SCC I've had the confidence to reach for the stars. I have faith in our team and business and what we can do to make a difference. Now, I mentor some of our younger ladies and that has been a rewarding experience." ■

Just a minute with Lindsey Hunter...

Role models: David Attenborough because he's incredible, passionate, interesting and adventurous. And my colleague Ian Russell: I wouldn't be who I am or where I am without his friendship and mentorship.

Tell us something about yourself we don't know: I love recreational trampolining!

Your main strength and what could you work on? My superpower is doing many things at the same time intuitively and effectively. My weakness is empathy. It's a strength too, but I sometimes don't assert my own opinion enough.

Three ideal dinner guests: David Attenborough, I adore him; Sarah Millican because she's hilarious and just my type of humour; and Billy Connolly, a Scottish icon who can also bring the laughs.

Industry bugbear: There needs to be a better way to address the skills gap. I'd also like to see the industry be more appealing to women.

If you weren't in ICT what would you be doing? Helping people in some other way, like nursing or as a clinician within the NHS. I've worked with many staff at various NHS Boards in Scotland and they are all there for the same reason – because they want to give something back and see what they do as a public service.

Best advice you have been given: Take a step back, take the emotion out of it and trust your instincts.

In hindsight: I would have been bolder when younger.

How do you relax? Trampolining! Also meditation, spending time with my husband and kids, cycling, hiking and Netflix.

Top tip for resellers: Understand your value and 'why you'.

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AI pioneer transforms cont

Artificial intelligence is transforming how contact centres operate and bursting through strongly in the comms channel is Elisha Telecom CEO Jeff Green who is at the vanguard of AI developments.

Solving puzzles is something Green has always enjoyed from a young age, so a career in ICT was the obvious choice. "As a programmer, the excitement of a business user coming to me with a crumpled piece of paper and telling me that this is the report that they wanted to see, was like a jigsaw puzzle," he stated. "I just had to find the pieces in a box of bits and bytes. As the industry evolved, my job evolved and those ungoverned best practices that I picked up in the early days became paramount to what I do now as a business leader. The fundamentals of building applications that are easy to maintain, simple to use and driven by the business, not the technology, are as relevant today as they have always been."

More recently that's involved leveraging AI initiatives so that clients and resellers can benefit by supplementing their business processes. "While AI is the talk of the town, it's the integration of AI that really makes the difference, so we're focusing on that too," commented Green.

Elisha Telecom was established by Green and Mike Torres in 2006. They were both running successful IT companies but decided to form a business that serviced the needs of the emerging call centre industry in the Philippines. "VoIP was very new back then and Internet connectivity was not what it is today, with most call centres using on-premise proprietary PBXs," explained Green. "That meant persuading clients to move to a hosted telephony platform, that we had built ourselves, was a challenge to say the least. But we persevered and eventually were able to capitalise on our success in the Philippines and offer our solutions to UK clients."

Channel focus

Elisha Telecom has a team of 50 engineers and support staff located in Manila. And its client demographic in the Philippines is quite different to those in the UK. "In the Philippines we work more directly with larger end users, while in the UK we are working via resellers to support businesses from 200 seats all the way down to 10-seat customers," noted Green.



Jeff Green

I have worked in the IT industry since the days of coding sheets and punched cards – for me this is an exciting time like never before

This year the company launched Elisha Insights, an AI-based metrics solution built to transform how contact centres operate. "Our key investment area is access to data and as such we look to technology providers who can aggregate data to help us perfect Elisha Insights," added Green.

"Commercialised AI is in its infancy and we are looking to integrate best of breed AI tools to enable Elisha Insights to transform the efficiency of contact centres worldwide. The gaps are yet to be known as this is an evolving technology in what some are deeming to be the fifth industrial revolution.

"As a company that focuses on technology, AI is presenting us with significant opportunities. AI tools out of the box such as ChatGPT are not, and will never be, the complete solution. They are tools to augment and enhance the potential of us mere humans, and the breadth of customisations required to leverage these tools and produce solutions specific to client needs is an incredible business opportunity."

Green's key technology partners were previously call termination providers and, while this is still important, the cost of calls is no longer the enabler of maximising

value. "Calls are no longer provided as a metered commodity and are bundled as part of the proposition so expectations on call costs are therefore tethered," added Green. "And as we move towards the copper switch-off, we're building stronger relationships with companies that provide fast Internet with QoS guarantees, ensuring customers can leverage reliable, high quality connections. We also aim to enable our clients to process calls, texts, emails, web chats and social media interactions in a way that is efficient and easy to reference."

The other big change observed by Green is the

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Contact centres Why it's prime time to leverage the full potential of UCaaS

clear transition away from desk phones towards softphones, WebRTC and mobile devices as endpoints. "MS Teams is fundamental in this transition so we've ensured our customers and resellers can make the move to Teams," he added. "Communication services are changing faster than ever and we're staying focused on ensuring that our developers have immediate access to the training and tools needed to deliver new UC solutions and AI integrations.

"Most important is Elisha Insights, our platform-agnostic reporting engine that provides customers with access to all the optimisations and improvements that AI-driven insights can surface, in a simplified format and in a cost-effective, per-use package."

Planning ahead

Green sees Elisha Telecom continuing to solidify its position as a front runner in AI-generated metrics. "This will be achieved through the early adoption of what is available now so that in five years times the data accumulated will provide us with invaluable insights into the functioning and performance of contact centres," he added. "I have worked in the IT industry since the days of coding sheets and punched cards and for me this is an exciting time like never before. Just like the introduction of the microchip, AI has the potential to absolutely transform the world we all live in for the better. And those willing to embrace the changes brought about by advances in AI will find boundless opportunities – when done right." ■

Just a minute with Jeff Green...

Role model: My father who worked as a monumental stone mason and who continued to work past 90 years old because he loved his job.

Tell us something about yourself we don't know: I wrote a computer game in the early 80s on an IBM mainframe which ran on green and black screens. I was reprimanded and told games on computers would never catch on.

Your main strength and what could you work on? My strength has always been to develop relationships based on trust. My weakness is my lack of confidence when meeting people for the first time.

Three ideal dinner guests: Isambard Kingdom Brunel, a tech genius and visionary who made the seemingly impossible come true. Jimi Hendrix, his music is as good today as it was back in the sixties. And Elisha Gray, our company's namesake and reputed to be the inventor of the telephone.

What do you fear most? Public speaking. I freeze.

If you weren't in ICT what would you be doing? Selling classic cars and motorcycles.

Best advice you have been given: A business takes five years to gain traction so stick with it and don't get disheartened.

Biggest risk you have taken? To leave the comfort of large corporates in favour of running my own business.

One example of something you have overcome? Micromanaging and the inability to delegate.

Top tip for resellers: Put an equal amount of effort into maintaining existing customers and relationships as you do winning new business.

By Mark Pillow, Managing Director, Voip Unlimited

The 2025 switch off has prompted every business to look at its telephony and communication services and ask, 'What do we want the future of our communications to look like'? For some, it may be as simple as an apple-to-apples replacement of a typical landline, while others may wish to invest in a fully fledged UC solution to adopt new features and functionality and make significant improvements to customer experiences. Either way, the balance of price and functionality is an important spectrum for both extremes. And no matter where your customers sit on that spectrum, it's important to understand the history and context of UCaaS and the benefits it can bring to end users, so that you can advise the best course of action to help those customers grow in the coming years.

Voice services changed dramatically in 2011 when Gamma launched its Horizon hosted voice platform which defined a new age of financial power for the channel, bundling free hardware through the initial agreement and increasing that spend via new hardware requirements as those customers grew, as well as the predictable increase in call charges.

Over the years, the focus slowly migrated to functionality and flexibility



Mark Pillow

Everyone seems to be buying UC solutions on price, ignoring the transformative functions and integrations that a properly deployed UC platform can provide.

as customers demanded more from their UC solutions, such as soft clients and mobile clients delivered via integrated apps, causing concern over price conservation.

Growing demand

Then, with the rise of remote and hybrid working models, the demand for UCaaS solutions rocketed massively. However, minutes and hardware (key revenue creators for the channel) suddenly plummeted as video calling and collaboration apps such as Teams and Zoom were prioritised. Teams changed the game for the channel and while it became a vital tool for remote working, not many providers could harness its full potential. Only those network providers who could integrate it fully saw the blessing in disguise that it was.

Now, everyone seems to be buying UC solutions on

price, just as they were with the far more commoditised voice services of years ago, ignoring the transformative functions and integrations that a properly deployed UC platform can provide. Coming full circle, these cost-conscious UC solutions may be ideal for those SME/micro-businesses that just need a fit-for-purpose replacement of their analogue lines. However, greater margins can be realised when selling in the benefits of a fully featured UCaaS solution that provides greater flexibility and functionality.

Some resellers may need to better understand the capabilities and potential that the UC solutions they offer can provide, not just selling the modern equivalent of a box solution, integrating periphery services, delivering AI-powered routing and IVRs alongside rich reporting and analytics. This is a massive opportunity, especially in the SME economy where understanding is lacking. However, there is still a question of whether they will embrace the proposition.

The previous persuading themes of the 2025 switch off, and remote working, have been done to death. Instead, education is the key now, informing customers of the positive benefits that UCaaS provides, and the right vendor partner will squash that challenge with sales and marketing support that ensures customers buy-in with case studies and skilled consultation. ■

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Selling full scale UCaaS

A more agile and holistic sales approach will be key to success in the evolving UCaaS arena, writes Iain Sinnott, Head of International Carrier Sales, Enreach for Service Providers.

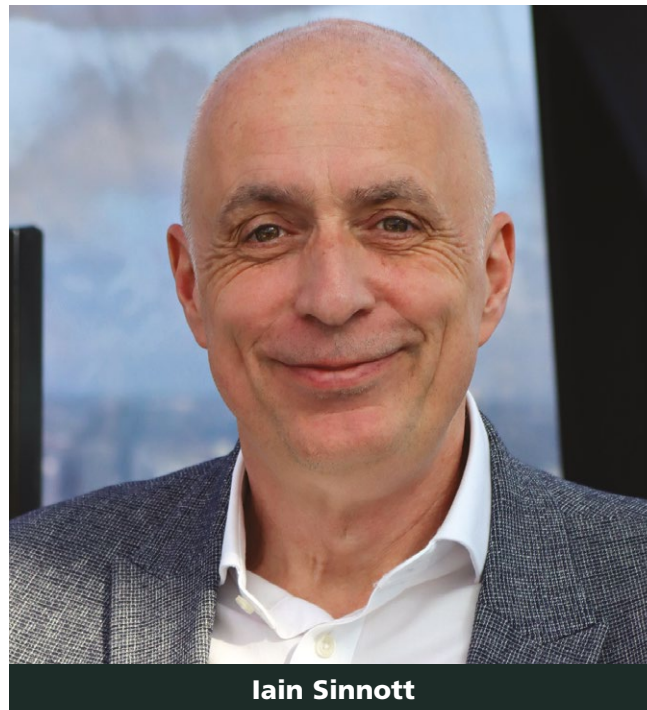
Understanding the future evolution of UCaaS means knowing about the starting point. Most service providers began by offering UCaaS to replace traditional PBX services. With virtual meetings now a default, more recently, there have been discussions around adding the CX and more mobility to UCaaS, but it is early days for many service providers and just the tip of the iceberg.

However, as we look at 2024, a lot more of that UCaaS iceberg is going to become apparent, including non-voice and AI tools. What needs to stay top of mind is that there is also now a more mature customer expectation. They are increasingly looking for complete technology solutions from a single source, all integrated, which, after all, is the ultimate definition of UC. So, resellers who cannot provide a broader UCaaS solution, including the full range of ICT, will see margin squeezed based on what they cannot deliver. While voice-only is a falling revenue stream, the evolution of UCaaS is a springboard to new revenue sources.

The B2B comms sector needs to create its own equivalent to the consumer market's quad play. After all, if a UC provider has IT competencies, then it does not need to defend itself against an IT player. And if IT is the most uncomplicated door to push, do that and bring the comms in behind, just like a TV provider does with domestic broadband.

While there are many service providers yet to embrace the UCaaS imperative, there are also some pioneers who have gone far beyond just selling cloud-based voice services, adding multiple disciplines into their portfolios. Some have bought IT companies, whether to build up their own internal skills or to support sales. Others are forming strategic partnerships.

Beyond IT, two trends that are already happening will be even more prevalent in the next couple of years. For instance, giving SMBs access to contact centre-style features from within their UCaaS solutions can make a major difference to the end customer experience. For a small business with a small team, all of whom



Iain Sinnott

have to be customer-facing at some point, casual contact centre features can help process enquiries more rapidly while giving their customers a better service.

Mobile-first

Another huge opportunity is to help mobilise businesses. For years, the Nordic countries have been the gold standard for mobile-first, yet it was slow to take off in the rest of the region. That has all changed, and more resellers and service providers are waking up to this largely untapped opportunity, partly driven by the work anywhere culture, but also that, irrespective of location, mobiles are becoming the de-facto device of choice at work.

Mobilising businesses is rapidly becoming a non-negotiable requirement, and UCaaS is the ideal central pivot. Phasing out the desktop phone in favour of a mobile client, a PC client, a webRTC client or an integrated SIM card creates

the ultimate flexibility. Then, business process and personal choice become active factors in how businesses, teams, and individuals optimise their working day.

A key component to achieving all this added value is using APIs, a gateway to differentiation. APIs can help unlock the door to seamless integrations between UC and contact centre services, CRMs and productivity tools. Selling those higher ROI solutions is a huge opportunity. Again, APIs have been around for years, but what is changing is their more widespread availability and easier deployment. Expect to see far more conversations around APIs in 2024, with more options for service providers to augment their UCaaS offerings with additional apps to create added value for customers.

Also, recent innovations in API technology layers make it far easier for competitive offerings to be present in the same UCaaS portfolio,

giving resellers and their customers more choice, playing to another aspect of the market's evolution... more organisations are realising that they need to 'play nice' and, if not collaborate, at least acknowledge that they need to co-exist.

Automation

As well as enabling extra revenue, APIs can help reduce internal costs by automating much of the human element within onboarding and account management. Another trend is intelligent, user-friendly portals covering every aspect of customer provisioning, training and adoption, to deliver UCaaS on a much larger scale. Looking into the future, those portals will ideally provide ongoing management, such as metrics around whether people actually use certain services.






All these developments will help resellers arm themselves against ever increasing competition in the UC market, especially from the hyperscalers. Sure, it is an increasingly demanding environment, but there are still many under-exploited opportunities within UCaaS.

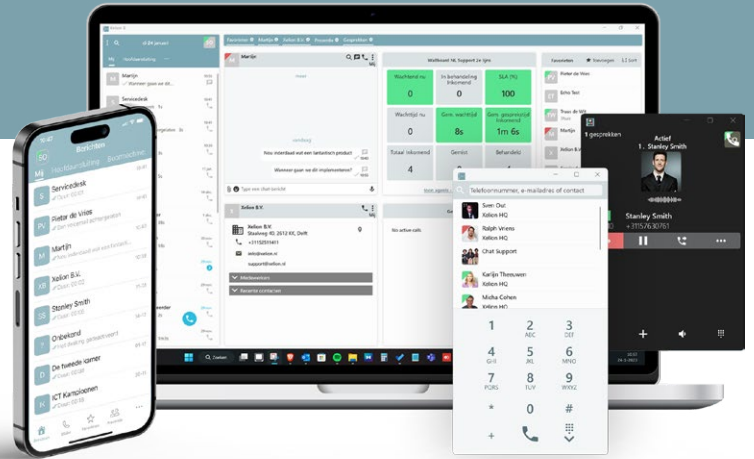
So, when we are talking about the future of UCaaS, it should not be about just the evolution of the technology evolution, it is as much about how it is understood, sold, used and maintained within the context of a much broader technology picture, driven by the needs of customers and the expectations of their customers. While that is going to require some focus and effort, if the variety of research studies about UCaaS growth are right, the potential gains are huge. ■

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Five minutes with...

Rob Coupland, CEO, Pulsant

How do you plan to take the edge infrastructure lead?

The key lies in building a great team and letting them deliver. A good CEO surrounds themselves with the right people and gives them the space to do what they do best. It's all about creating an environment where the leadership team has a diverse range of skills and experience to help question, develop and push our vision forward. My role is to ensure we remain aligned to that vision. Real business value comes when you empower your people and support them when needed. We are also looking at more targeted programmes in specific areas to support our infrastructure strategy.

What are your investment priorities?

Last year was transformational with investment in our core infrastructure. That investment is already starting to pay off with a step up in sales performance. I firmly believe those

seeds of growth will continue as we focus on communicating our platform and capabilities out to the wider market. Another important area of investment is early careers. We've launched a graduate programme with ten new hires, alongside five apprentices to start to develop our own talent pool. Like many companies we have found it a challenge to find skilled employees. They are in high demand, particularly in some of the areas we need to scale, so we decided to invest and nurture them ourselves which we've done successfully in our commercial team.

Are you balancing competing priorities right now?

There is always a tension between near-term execution and long-term vision and strategy and making sure you get the balance right. Clearly, you have to meet your short-term targets. But at the same time if



Rob Coupland

you only focus on those you can't expect to drive your transformational longer-term strategic goals. It can be a tough balancing act and there are always compromises and difficult decisions to make in terms of where to place investment. As a CEO you have to be comfortable making tough decisions and ensuring that everyone understands where we are heading.

What client challenges are navigating?

We are living in an economically challenging time. For our clients the volatility of the energy markets has had a significant impact on their operating costs and it's something

we are trying to manage on their behalf, as data centre costs are often a significant percentage of their overall budgets. For example, as a major buyer of electricity we're better placed to procure power than many businesses still operating their own server rooms.

Where are the big opportunities?

The greatest opportunity lies in collaboration, not competition. With recent Government investment in regional innovation hubs, businesses can benefit from developing an ecosystem to support that turns innovation into long-term growth opportunities. A collaborative ecosystem approach represents a real opportunity for ISVs, SI and technology partners to step up and support those businesses to grow. Technology partners should see this as the next cloud wave.

To benefit from new technologies, including AI, IoT, 5G connectivity and edge computing, businesses will need the right specialist support to help them execute a future proof IT strategy. ■

Resellers help beat shop crime

In the retail markets it's in a reseller's DNA to try to land 'big store' deals, but partners can secure large margin business from smaller outlets struggling to combat the endemic rise in shoplifting, according to Wildix Country Manager Ian Rowan.

The Federation of Independent retailers is calling for help to deal with gangs of brazen shoplifters who are stealing to order, believing they are not a police priority. And, worryingly, retail staff are facing verbal and physical abuse daily. "Shoplifting is massive in the UK currently," said Rowan. "Every two seconds something is stolen from a shop and there are 850 attacks on retail staff every single day which is a year-on-year rise of 27 per cent. If you add in the increase in the prices of goods, the cost to retailers is immense."



Ian Rowan

Rowan believes Wildix's implementation of computer vision and machine learning puts its x-hoppers retail headset solution ahead in the fight against this increase in shop crime. "The

integration of x-hoppers continuously tracks and analyses movement on a shop's CCTVs to automatically pick up on suspicious actions that may indicate shoplifting or other threats," he said. "Once the system notices a security risk it issues an automatic alert to staff over the x-hoppers headsets. This is so much better than simple surveillance as it brings shop owners reliable, fully automatic tracking of possible threats and breaches."

Partner successes

South Wales based reseller ETS is successfully rolling out the solution to hundreds of Holland & Barrett outlets across the UK and Europe, but Rowan urges resellers to target smaller shop owners in their area, who may not have the security support the big retailers enjoy and can make a purchasing decision

without delay. He claims healthy profits are available from these sorts of deals. "As an example, one of our partners sold into a Premier general shop with a post office in Tenby in Wales," he commented. "If that had been sold as a two line UCaaS solution it would have given the resellers £20 or so, but they sold it for £700 because we've got anti-theft protection built-in using AI, which will save the store £21,000 a year."

"When you think of a retail solution, people consider your Tesco, your Asda, your Waitrose, which have long sales cycles. The great thing about the kind of shop in Tenby is that you can walk into any of those businesses and speak directly to the owners. If you focus on their business needs it can be a quick turnaround. Partners can make a lot of potential revenue from those businesses." ■

From strategic vision to rollout reality

The story of a Programme Management Office – with a difference.

CityFibre’s Programme Management Office (PMO) function, led by Sarah Malin, has played a critical role in driving the company’s fibre rollout from a standing start to 2.7m premises ready for service today. We caught up with Sarah (who often light-heartedly refers to herself ‘Director of Stuff’) to explore her team’s unusual remit and its role in the next phase of a challenger’s journey.

“Set crystal clear priorities, ensure different parts of the business are on the same page, and never shirk a new challenge”.

These are Sarah’s core work principles and just like CityFibre’s ethos itself, she gets a kick out of taking on the seemingly impossible and making it happen!

By combining her PMO role with that of Group Director of Operations, Sarah basically runs the company’s engine room. With a finger in every pie, her team has not only programme managed CityFibre to become the UK’s largest independent full fibre platform, but is now freshly focused on the challenge of growing the number of customers on its network as smoothly and efficiently as possible.

“Our first job is to make sure all parts of CityFibre understand our priorities and to support those interacting with partners and end-customers on a day-to-day basis”, explains Sarah. “In this sense, we’re the ‘glue’ of the organisation, getting alignment between different departments, considering their feedback,

responding to questions, and providing the ‘one truth’ central steer needed to achieve all our objectives.”

INSIDE THE ENGINE ROOM

When asked what she’s most proud of Sarah talks about how – with the right programme alignment – teams across CityFibre can work together to resolve challenges rapidly. For example, it was clear that ISP partners – especially those entering the consumer market for the first time – needed to interconnect at a single location to serve customers across CityFibre’s entire footprint.

“Within 18 months we’d project managed the launch of a new National Access product that enabled exactly that, saving them having to invest upfront in putting equipment in all our Fibre Exchanges.”

Another example is CityFibre’s decision to upgrade its network platform from GPON to XGS-PON.

“It was always in CityFibre’s plan to trigger the XGS-PON upgrade when the time was right, but when that came, supported by our programme management,

the delivery teams went from the first pilot deployment across York, to a nationwide rollout programme running at impressive pace.”

The secret to this, in Sarah’s view, is the nimble and ambitious culture of the organisation.

“The rigour and process needed to deliver huge transformational change for any company starts with everyone knowing and understanding what the end-goal is, passionately stepping up to every challenge along the way and never settling for a mediocre solution at the end”.

It’s this challenger mindset and restless energy that has helped CityFibre tackle every curveball so far, like rising supply chain costs, Covid, Brexit and a turbulent economy.

“We’ve learnt as a team how to successfully scale and refine our build. Now it’s about driving quality up as high as we can get it, growing the customers on our network and ensuring they never want to leave!” Ready For Service (RFS) (rather than the easier measure of ‘Premises



Sarah Malin

Passed’) has always been important in CityFibre, but now it’s sacrosanct because high-quality customer experience hinges on the accuracy of this one truth, readiness information.

“My team’s job is to align all the moving parts across our business to ensure that when we release each premises as RFS we are ready to provide a guaranteed customer install date and set the service live without a hitch on that date. That’s exactly the kind of challenge my team of programme managers relish.”

TRUTHTELLERS AND ACTION MAKERS

Malin is not your typical senior executive. She’s made her way to where she is now by experience rather than academia; recognising that leadership is not about the person doing the talking, but listening, mobilising and never being afraid of a challenge.

“I get bored easily and the

fact that every day in a PMO is different with a new project around every corner, suits me to a tee. Our remit also goes far beyond that of a typical PMO. We maintain a vital link into strategy and our role is to convert that strategy into operations, providing data reports and analysis on almost every moving part. This makes us the conscience of the business too, providing independent, unabridged feedback on how the company is performing and what needs to be tackled next. We don’t sugar coat anything. We expose issues and opportunities and we manage the action that follows!”

EVIDENCE LIVES IN PLAIN SIGHT

It’s easy to underestimate the impact of a challenger on an industry but for CityFibre the evidence lives in plain sight. Homes, businesses, public services and local economies are already benefitting from better connectivity and choice, ISPs and build partners have the opportunity to grow and evolve their businesses in tandem, and the UK’s incumbent operator can no longer rest on its laurels.

As CityFibre moves at pace into the next phase of its journey, more positive impacts will be felt nationwide and right in the middle will be Sarah and her team with eyes across it all, powering things forward and helping to navigate whatever challenges arise along the way.

For more news from CityFibre, visit www.cityfibre.com/fibreleadership.



Priorities that will keep

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 their priority paradigm is evolving with the times.

In a fast moving and competitive market business leaders can face a completely different set priorities and they must take responsibility for the future of their organisations. But competition is only part of the consideration for setting strategy, says Chris Wade, Chief Marketing & Product Officer, Gamma. "Focusing solely on competitors means you are always reacting to what they are doing, rather than proactively planning based on market demands and your own capabilities," he stated.

"This involves understanding your current markets and being aware of changes within them, be it technological shifts, evolving customer behaviours, or new ways to buy and sell. It's important to discern which trends are simply shiny objects that are attractive but not substantive drivers for growth. Understanding your own core competencies and evolving them over time is crucial."

It's also vital to develop as many touchpoints with the market as possible to feel where it is heading, noted Wade. "Strategy without

execution is useless, and execution without strategy is aimless," he added. "Finding the balance between the two is key. This involves setting the right direction, being open to changes in response to internal or external events and remaining as focused and disciplined as possible in executing against the plan that you have. Clarity on goals is essential, as is understanding the purpose behind each piece of work. And new ideas should be given time to flourish. However, it's equally important to recognise when they are not working and act accordingly. Ensuring you have the right people in the business to manage and drive necessary programmes of work is also crucial."

In the current environment it is important to keep a close eye on price and inflation, as well as changes in the overall technology and customer landscape. "We need to be ahead of those changes, providing services for our users as they need them," commented Wade. "These changes also encourage a larger number of diverse companies to look at our markets and try to move into them. This is a good thing



Chris Wade

Understanding your core competencies and evolving them over time is crucial. It's also vital to develop as many touchpoints with the market as possible to feel where it is heading.

as it shows we operate in an interesting space and it helps provide further stimulus for us. To make sure we are ahead of all those pieces we must ensure we have a comprehensive offering and capability in the business — the right people, technology, and level of process that allows us to support repeatable, predictable, successful execution without stifling the company."

Operational excellence has become more important

than ever, observed Diego Tedesco, Director, Wholesale Fixed, Virgin Media O2 Business. "As customer solutions become more complex partners need a consistent experience from their connectivity supplier and a robust, reliable service," he said. "We need to keep this at the heart of our decision making to remain competitive."

He noted that the market is making a significant shift to accommodate a

greater demand for high bandwidth services to build the robust, scalable core networks that underpin the business applications being deployed over the next few years. "With the increasing adoption of multi-cloud environments and AI, the likes of which bring capacity requirements, the need for much higher bandwidth grows," said Tedesco. "We're seeing a greater focus on these offerings from partners. And we're making changes to place greater emphasis on our core infrastructure and high bandwidth access services. Being able to read the market, take note of where the industry is headed and adapt our business focus accordingly is key to staying ahead."

According to Tedesco, partner success is all about challenging relationships throughout the entire lifecycle and creating the right environment and support model to foster mutual growth. "We're uniting our customer-facing support and business improvement teams so that customer feedback is at the forefront of our operational improvement roadmap," added Tedesco.

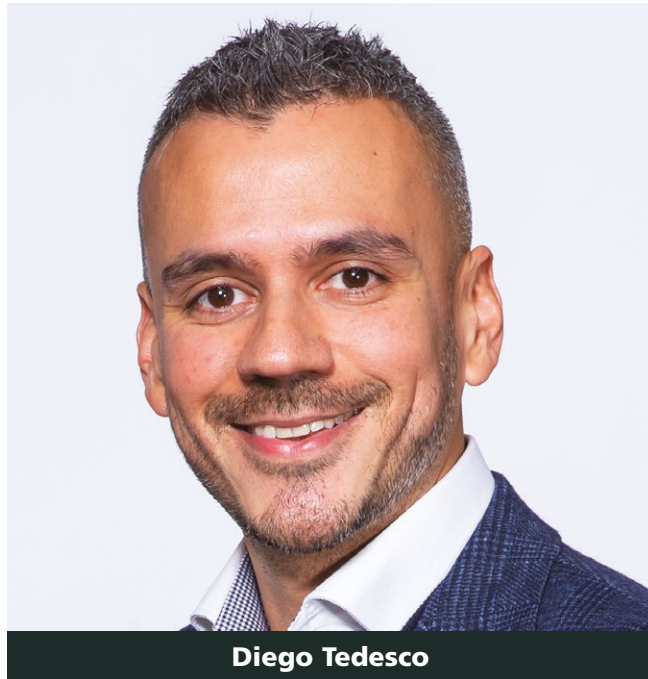
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"This feedback has guided us in improving key customer-centric processes such as delivery and has been integral to our digital strategy. It's also strengthened our partnerships by aligning them more closely with our network expansion plans. Better communication underpins all of this.

"We're also recognising the demand for automation and the requirement for partners to seamlessly connect to our systems through APIs. The way in which our partners do business is also becoming less transactional and more consultative. Partners are getting more bespoke requests from their customer base and they need greater support from suppliers."

Differentiation

While developing a competitive landscape is an essential aspect of any market, so is developing strong partnerships that become a key differentiator, according to Tom O'Hagan, Managing Director, TalkTalk Wholesale Services. "Given the challenges the market



Diego Tedesco

Being able to read the market, take note of where the industry is headed and adapt business focus accordingly is key to staying ahead.

is facing – from driving innovation to maximising margins and upskilling teams – we've invested in becoming more collaborative with partners through the launch our new partner programme," he stated.

Digging deeper into some of that work, TalkTalk Wholesale

Services has been focused on transitioning to digital-first processes, ensuring the ordering experience is user friendly. "That spans much of our organisation, from developing new automated processes and self-service functions to make 1Portal a better experience, and ensuring all products are consumable through it, including new high growth, high margin managed services such as Unified Threat Management, Software-Defined Networking and DDoS solutions," explained O'Hagan.

"Our long-term strategy requires keeping a constant eye on the future and investing in tomorrow's essential services. We're always on the lookout for new potential partners and acquisitions that will deliver a commercial benefit or key differentiators while ensuring we cater to all market levels, from international carriers through to aggregators,

altnets, resellers and systems integrators.

"As a Tier-1 operator, it's up to us to drive innovation and opportunity for partners. And as a teaser, we've been exploring methods and processes to improve our services on behalf of our team, partners and end customers, to democratise Internet access for all. That has been TalkTalk Wholesale Services' mission since day one and will continue to be."

Key strategies

As noted, the channel is a fast-changing industry and on the front line of major technological shifts. Therefore, channel leaders' priorities and strategies will constantly evolve as new challenges arise, observed Gavin Jones, Channel Partners Director, BT Wholesale. "Our long-term strategy is threefold," he stated.

"Firstly, we remain focused on the move towards all-IP. As the 2025 date edges closer we're working with partners to diversify their

portfolio and ensure they can cater to customers' evolving needs. Secondly, sustainability is a key priority and we are investing significantly in our networks, solutions and services to ensure we achieve BT's net zero goals.

"We've pledged to become a net zero business by the end of March 2031 which can be accomplished through initiatives including embracing all-IP technology, retiring legacy systems and converting the majority of our fleet to electric or zero emissions. We call on all in the channel to outline their sustainability goals so we can work together for a more sustainable future.

"Thirdly, we know that people make the biggest difference in the channel. So we'll continue championing our employees through mentorship programmes, DE&I policies and safe spaces to help drive positive change. This will also allow us to propel business growth by paving the way for the next generation of channel leaders." ■



Tom O'Hagan

Our long-term strategy requires keeping a constant eye on the future and investing in tomorrow's essential services.



Gavin Jones

We call on all in the channel to outline their sustainability goals so we can work together for a more sustainable future.

The ICT channel's best performers were celebrated at this year's Comms National Awards ceremony (main sponsor Giacom) on September 28th, staged at The Park Plaza Westminster Bridge and hosted by broadcaster Vernon Kay. This year's stellar event saw Global 4 Communications scoop a trio of awards including the Reseller of the Year award. Zest4 MD Mandy Fazelynia was crowned Entrepreneur of the Year.

Comms Dealer Editorial Director Nigel Sergent said: "The event saw 150 entries from 80 of the channel's leading companies. Once again, the Comms National Awards has underlined its status as The Oscars of the ICT channel. Our valued judges reported another upgrade in the quality of entries and the teams who put the submissions together deserve the utmost praise, regardless of the final outcomes."

"As ever the awards ceremony was a wonderful night of celebration and thanks must go to everyone who attended to celebrate channel success. Congratulations to all the winners and highly commended teams and special thanks must go to all our sponsors, especially our headline sponsor Giacom, which continues to support the channel in so many positive ways."

After the Awards ceremony, celebrations continued at an afterparty DJ'd by Fat Tony.



The Sky's the limit!



A big thumbs up from winner Paul Hooper, Uplands



Host Vernon Kay with Entrepreneur of the Year Mandy Fazelynia



Start Communications celebrate their third year of winning



Over to you Daryl Pile

Headline Sponsor



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CELEBRATES CHANNEL'S SUPERSTARS



Awards host Vernon Kay



Now that's just showing off



BT Wholesale post-awards party DJ, Fat Tony



The Winning Pangea team – where are the Rumbulls?



Snap!



Ellie Allseybrook of Inform Billing leading the winner's conga



Clash of the waistcoats

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Entrepreneur of the Year

sponsored by
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Entrepreneur of the Year
Mandy Fazelynia

Software Solution Category



Best Call Management Solution
Tollring



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Inform Billing

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comms national



Best ICT Distributor
Nuvias UC

UC & Collaboration Category



Best UCaaS Vendor
Voip Unlimited



Best CCaaS Vendor
Intermedia Cloud Communications

Intelligent Network & Connectivity Category



Best Network
CityFibre

Service Provider Category



Best Wholesale Service Provider (up to £10m)
MS3 Networks

UC Solution Category

sponsored by
Gamma



Best SME UC Customer Solution
Start Communications



Best Altnet
MS3 Networks



Best Wholesale Service Provider (above £10m)
Giacom



Best Enterprise UC Customer Solution
Opus Technology

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Mobile/IoT Category

sponsored by



Best SME Mobile/IoT Customer Solution – Spitfire Network Services



Best Enterprise Mobile/IoT Customer Solution – FluidOne

Vertical Market Category

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Best SME Vertical Market Customer Solution – Windsor Telecom



Best Enterprise Vertical Market Customer Solution – Global 4 Communications Ltd

Managed Service Category

sponsored by



Best SME Managed Service Customer Solution – KubeNet



Best Enterprise Managed Service Customer Solution – Uplands Mobiles Ltd

Contact Centre Category

sponsored by



Best SME Contact Centre Customer Solution – Avoira

Contact Centre Category

sponsored by



Best Enterprise Contact Centre Customer Solution – Elite Group

Business Success Category

Business Success Category

sponsored by



Reseller Business Transformation Award – Global 4 Communications Ltd



Reseller Deal of the Year – UK Connect

Business Innovation Category

sponsored by



Best Reseller Innovation Award – FourNet



Best Supplier Innovation Award – PromptVoice

Channel Support Category



Best Partner Programme (up to £10m) – Pangea



Best Partner Programme (above £10m) – Jola



Best Channel Business Service Support to Win



Best Channel Portal – Jola

Positive Impact Category

sponsored by



Diversity Award – BT Wholesale



Sustainability Award – TalkTalk Wholesale Services

Reseller of the Year

sponsored by



Reseller of the Year – Global 4 Communications Ltd

Overcoming the growing complexity of contract management and delivery

A disastrous Oracle rollout has been blamed (in part) for nearly bankrupting Birmingham City Council. The new IT system needs circa £46.53m to fix ongoing problems and the debacle puts a spotlight on the potential complexity of deals today and the importance of successful project management and delivery. This month, we asked business leaders across the channel the extent to which their contracts are becoming more challenging, the particular areas of complexity, and the measures/investments they have put in place to ensure glitch-free project delivery.



ROSS FERGUSON,
BUSINESS SUPPORT,
KUBENET

Several matters are impacting the complexity of contract and project management. Evolving regulations and strengthened compliance standards, combined with an accelerated market and an increased focus on personalised service, mean we have had to adapt and react quicker to satisfy these requirements. The key to success is regular communication. Maintaining close contact with customers makes sure that both parties are happy with the contract and the delivery, allowing us to satisfy the objectives of each project while ensuring minimal business interruption. We have invested in Agile project management training and delivery tools.



PETER GLYNNE,
DIRECTOR OF
CONSULTING, AUXILION

Government expenditure is put under scrutiny as they're spending from the public purse, meaning contracts can be extremely challenging around value for money, management of scope and the treatment of risk and liability. Successful project management is critical to the delivery of the contract and solution. The benefits and desired outcomes of the project should drive the delivery of the solution and not the other way around. Strong targeted project assurance provides the confidence that issues can be spotted before they threaten delivery. Robust governance is crucial and even more important is the effective governance of all projects across the organisation to balance out overall investment and priorities.



JAMES ROUTLEDGE,
SALES DIRECTOR,
GLOBAL 4

The evolving telephony landscape and its technological advancements mean customers have access to more functionality than ever before, which brings both advantages and risks. The process of implementation must now be more considered than ever before, or your customer faces a very different reality to the expectations provided at the outset. You must ensure internal handover contains comprehensive notes. A customer-focused Solution Discovery session planning the final design before anything gets ordered even in the SME space is also key. By capturing, understanding, risk-mitigating and clearly outlining any potential disruptions upfront, it is possible to fulfil even the most complex orders.



MATT BANNON,
OPERATIONS DIRECTOR,
ELITE GROUP

Solution-based projects in the converged IT world contain many deliverables across multiple technologies. The key is to focus on the customer's business outcomes and objectives, and the real reasons behind their project investment. Projects must capture a robust and detailed scope of work, which outlines the deliverables and the success criteria. We have invested in systems to ensure that our project methodology drives project tasks, ensuring the right quality checks are in place, along with clear customer communication and guidance. Project change controls are essential for the smooth operation of solution-based projects, providing the flexibility to adapt the plan as needed. Using shared and standardised project documentation across teams promotes consistency. Elite leverages a PMO structure that connects our Project Managers with the Consultants and Engineers responsible for delivering customer outcomes.



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complexity of project



STEVE O'CONNELL,
SALES AND MARKETING
DIRECTOR,
ADVANTEX NETWORK
SOLUTIONS

Most large contracts involve intricate specifications, extensive deliverables and significant financial stakes. Adding to the complexity are numerous stakeholders, many without IT backgrounds. Ensuring everyone comprehends and aligns with the contract's terms and expectations is therefore crucial, yet often elusive. Project kick-offs often reveal gaps between user expectations and contract obligations, emphasising the importance of thorough consultations and site visits. The issue of cost versus quality is another obstacle as some negotiate contracts without fully grasping the trade-offs made to secure lower prices. We conduct thorough site assessments and advise where we feel specifications are misaligned. We invest in transparent project management systems and processes certified by BSI and Constructionline. We are also committed to ongoing staff training.



PAUL HOOPER,
MD, UPLANDS

The rapid advancement of technology has ushered in an era of unparalleled customisation options and heightened customer expectations, necessitating meticulous attention to project scopes. These shifts, combined with ever-evolving industry regulations, demand our project management teams to be in a constant state of adaptation. We've invested in staff training and development and introduced an online helpdesk and enhanced our billing processes for customers. These initiatives bolster our operational efficiencies, streamline workflows and ensure smooth glitch-free project deliveries.



BRUCE STRANG,
COO,
COMMSWORLD

Public sector contracts remain consistently complex, without a notable increase in challenges. During the bidding phase, both the customer and contractor should establish absolute clarity regarding their respective roles, responsibilities and resource allocation for the work program. Effective project delivery hinges on a solid foundation laid during the bid phase, followed by the initial engagement with the customer. Ensuring all key stakeholders are actively engaged and have a comprehensive understanding of their roles throughout the project's lifecycle is paramount. The bedrock of successful execution lies in open, transparent communication. It is essential to identify and address issues promptly with a focus on developing mitigation strategies in a proactive manner.



CHRIS GILL,
PROFESSIONAL SERVICES
DIRECTOR, RAZORBLUE

IT requirements become more demanding year on year and contracts are becoming more complex. Companies constantly seek out new ways to minimise downtime and enhance efficiencies, while maintaining tight security in a landscape that changes daily. razorblue has invested in our staff's upskilling and ongoing professional development to the tune of £100k in the last 12 months alone. Technology is crucial, but our people and our ability to communicate with clients are at the heart of our investments. We use adaptive delivery methodologies to suit the projects and our client base, and we front every project with a Project Manager, a Technical Architect and the most experienced Consultants. No two contracts are the same so a collaborative approach and flexible delivery methodology ensure the best results.



SOHINI RAITHATHA,
CEO, REDSQUID

We've witnessed numerous technology deployments go astray, leaving organisations grappling with compromised systems that require months, sometimes even years, to rectify. Often, the root cause can be traced back to inadequate due diligence to ensure the technology aligns seamlessly with an organisation's specific needs. Coupled with poor project management these missteps can jeopardise even the most comprehensive contracts. It is not the contracts that have become intricate, but the technology itself. To pre-empt such situations, we emphasise thorough due diligence for every client, detailed site assessments and tailored solutions. We are also integrating and investing in AI which minimises human errors, redirecting our energy and resources towards fostering personalised relationships.



IAN ROWAN,
COUNTRY MANAGER
UK&I, WILDIX

As contracts become more complex during deployment, partners need a firm understanding of increasing challenges and how to overcome them before the process starts. In the process of any sale, the prospect identifies business issues they wish to resolve with a new solution and if the value of resolving these issues is greater than the outlay, then the project typically moves forwards. These goals must form part of the project plan and a strong project methodology should be used to ensure they are delivered. Size is a big factor: It's natural that a larger customer will have more complex requirements, but the delivery is still about matching targets to goals to ensure business value is delivered. We include Kanban training, a project management methodology used by many MSPs to help ensure they deliver on all aspects of a project.



■ Forging
business
optimisation

Fournet's key hire



Iain Johnson

FOURNET has pulled in Iain Johnson as Head of Solution Design. He moved from Sabio where he was principal solutions lead with a particular focus on CCaaS. Prior to his eight year spell at Sabio Johnson was Principal Solution Consultant, EMEA, for CX software firm Genesys. FourNet CTO Stuart Williams said: "Iain brings a wealth of skills and a fresh perspective to FourNet, and will help us design, develop and deliver vendor agnostic CX transformation for our customers." Johnson, added: "I've been in the industry for a long time and I'm looking forward to helping push FourNet to the next level, keeping a mindful eye on driving innovation, creating new propositions, and being able to support the commercial

teams." Johnson's arrival builds on the appointment of former Strategy Consulting Director at Capita, Oliver Bareham, as Customer Experience Director last year; and ex-Innovations Director at Capita, Alan Linter, who was brought in as Group Consulting Director in August.

Also on the move...

FORMER Agilitas CMO
Richard Eglon has joined sustainable tech firm Nebula Global Services as Chief Marketing Officer. Eglon's channel experience also includes an eight year spell at Comms-care. Nebula Global Services CEO Ross Teague stated: "Richard's track record in building successful technology brands over the past 20-plus years speaks for itself and aligns with our own ambitions." Nebula supports the service propositions of MSPs, VARs and SIs through a global network of more than 7,400 technical and service delivery specialists. Eglon added "I've always been enticed by emerging and disruptive tech businesses with potential in terms of their service proposition and market opportunity. Nebula fits this mould."



Richard Eglon

LEEDS-based CloudCoCo's security operation will be headed up by incoming Head of Cyber Mark Allen. He brings 18 years technical and commercial experience and moves from Tieva where he was Head of New Business MSP. Prior roles include a stint as Sales Manager at Wavenet, Business Development Manager at Pure Technology Group and Cloud Overlay Specialist at M247. CloudCoCo's Director of Group Sales, Gary Saunders, stated: "Cyber will be a core pillar of our growth as we continue with our plan to reach £100m turnover."

RICHARD Morse has joined Inform Billing as New Business Manager. He brings more than 20 years experience in the ICT sector and was most recently Partner Success Manager at Daisy Communications. Prior stints at Daisy include Head of Mobile for Daisy Telecom and Sales Manager for the South and Scotland regions. He was also in the Daisy Telecom Acquisition Team which included the integration of 3G and BNS Telecom.

NAVINDER Uppal has taken the newly created role of Chief Digital Officer at Pulsant. He moves from JLA Group where he was Technical Director and brings a track record in system transformation and change management programmes. Uppal's appointment follows the launch in June of PlatformEdge, and his focus will be on providing strategic direction around the delivery of Pulsant's digital and systems roadmap. CEO Rob Coupland stated: "Nav will be a tremendous asset as we continue to pursue our ambitions within the edge infrastructure space."



Navinder Uppal

VoIP Unlimited brings in Gibbs



Paul Gibbs

POOLE-based Voip Unlimited's latest channel expansion campaign will be spearheaded by incoming Head of Sales Paul Gibbs. His prior experience includes sales leadership stints at Gamma, MyPhones and TelcoSwitch. "I wanted to re-enter the channel after an extended absence and it became evident that Voip Unlimited

represents large scale untapped potential," explained Gibbs. "My primary objective is to establish and enhance brand recognition and expand our network of resellers through education on key solutions and how to differentiate in a market saturated by commoditised services."

To help realise market potential Gibbs aims to leverage the combination of Voip Unlimited's technical ability and the relationships he has cultivated during his career. Also of particular interest, says Gibbs, is Voip Unlimited's status as a Tier-1 provider with a distinct network and SIP trunk solutions which underpin channel specific UCaaS with more products to follow.

Gibbs noted that the 2025 PSTN switch off marks the most significant industry shift since ISDN and he says it's prime time for resellers to establish new long-term customer and channel relationships.

"Certain providers have enjoyed unchallenged dominance for too long and in a market characterised by commoditisation I see an opportunity to meet resellers' demands for a one-stop-shop wholesale partner," added Gibbs.

Voip Unlimited Managing Director Mark Pillow, added: "Paul's experience in the channel makes him the top choice to lead our strategic growth aspirations."

Evolve's new trio

MANAGED network provider Evolve has strengthened its leadership team with the arrival of Lee Simpson as CFO. The move follows the appointments of Paul Washington as Director of Strategic Partnerships and Dean Lord as Account Director. Simpson's prior experience includes a spell as CFO at UK Hire Group. He also has a strong background in the M&A field having served as Head of M&A at law firm Slater & Gordon, Head of M&A at DCC Technology (Exertis), Head of M&A and Programme Office at Ainscough Crane Hire, and Associate Director of M&A at Tyco International.

Meanwhile, Washington brings more than 20 years experience in financial services and IT networks and was previously Senior Director of Banking & Financial Services Solutions and Head of Solutions at Cognizant, IBM, Sopra Banking Software and Atom Bank. Lord's prior experience includes a stint as Head of Connectivity at MLR Networks and he is especially focused on large scale deployments of solutions such as SD-WAN.

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4th July 2024
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 **comms national awards**

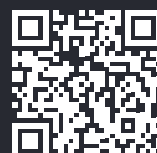
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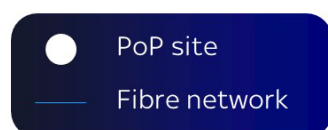
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