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comms dealer

THE HEARTBEAT OF THE UK ICT INDUSTRY

Gamma turns up the dial on UCaaS

GAMMA'S play in the UCaaS market has received a major boost following its acquisition of Ericsson-LG Enterprise partner EnableX.

SPECIAL REPORT

EnableX is made up from three dedicated businesses – Pragma, Techland and Candio – and is best known for providing 250-plus reseller partners with products and services around multiple technology areas including cloud communications.

"This acquisition boosts Gamma's EBITDA by up to 2% while bringing an alternative UC platform to Horizon, adding Ericsson to Cisco, Microsoft and AWS as key technology partners, as well as some interesting new channel focused services that can be better leveraged through Gamma's much larger (10x) partner base," commented Megabuyte Chief Analyst Philip Carse.

Gamma Business MD Daryl Pile (pictured above) added: "The acquisition significantly expands our channel portfolio, providing greater opportunities for partners to accelerate their growth, in particular through EnableX's partnership with Ericsson-LG Enterprise."

EnableX CEO Will Morey added: "It is clear how the portfolio we have fits into Gamma's strategy for growth in the UCaaS space. Bringing these businesses together will help us both deliver additional value to the channel."

Ericsson-LG Enterprise CEO Patrick Johansson noted: "Our journey in the UK market with the iPECS Unified Communications portfolio has been a success and we look forward to continuing our progress in partnership with Gamma."

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EDITOR'S COMMENT

Stuart Gilroy

IT'S SAD to see how the bad decisions of just a few global leaders have plunged the planet into a near crisis. Why, because they haven't considered deeply enough, or asked 'what if?', then one thing leads to another until, before you know it, the die has been cast and things start running out of control. Let's hope for some good decisions soon.

In a comms sector context, I remember like yesterday the demise of industry giant Marconi which happened soon after George Simpson took over in 1996 (the firm was then known as GEC) and threw himself into a major shift in strategic direction that put all eggs in the comms equipment basket – leaving the company vulnerable. That was a bad decision. Single handedly Simpson had created the conditions for a disastrous tailspin when the dot-com bubble burst and Marconi's shares ended up worth less than one per cent of their top end value. Circa £37 billion of market value had been wiped out in 18 months in what will probably remain the biggest failure of leadership, decision making and strategic planning in comms sector history.

What I found incredible at the time, and still do, is that the collapse of this huge company was singularly down to one person (with moral support from a sidekick) who was ambitious for change without really understanding what he was doing, and in the process made disastrously wrong, ill-considered and fateful decisions that he was confident in at the time.

Taking a lesson from the Marconi debacle... next time you make a big commitment, just in case, consider more deeply and ask 'what if?'. This might pay dividends when refocusing your business or undertaking an aggressive growth strategy, especially when you consider that a recent Comms Dealer survey of channel business leaders found that decision making may, in many cases, not be being shaped by the right issues.

Stuart Gilroy, Editor

Shareholder deal for Kerv

Mike Ing (left) and Alastair Mills

BRIDGEPOINT Development Capital has taken a majority shareholding in Kerv following a deal that saw LDC exit and reinvest £30m. The transaction generated an IRR (internal rate of return) of 45% for LDC.

During Kerv's three year partnership with LDC the services provider saw five-fold revenue growth, from £20m to £100m, and increased head-count from 100 to 700 in the UK, Spain, Portugal, France, Switzerland, India, Hong Kong, Singapore and the United States.

LDC supported the creation of Kerv in July 2020 when it backed founders Alastair Mills and Mike Ing to merge three cloud-based managed services businesses. LDC invested £22m in the initial transaction and provided £20m in follow on funding to support acquisitions.

Kerv Executive Chair Alastair Mills said: "In 2020 we had an ambition to create a technology business that truly put customers and employees first, recognising this is the key to long-term sustainable growth. LDC understood our vision and got behind us from the start.

"Kerv is still less than four years old and I'm keen to see what's possible with the support of both LDC and Bridgepoint in this next chapter."

Mills also noted that Kerv's employee engagement strategy and focus on D&I has led to 35% of new job roles being filled by women, surpassing the UK average of 20% for women in technology. Kerv also aims to become a certified B-Corp.

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

NEWS ROUNDUP

RIGBY-backed CloudClevr's acquisition of Cheltenham-based Bamboo Technology Group is the third in a series of investments designed to position CloudClevr as a major MSP. The deal follows last year's investments in NGC Networks and 4Sight Communications. CloudClevr CEO Steve Harris also assumes the position of Bamboo Chief Exec' while Bamboo's former CEO and founder Stuart Davis and Director Lorrin White continue in advisory roles. Harris said: "Bamboo brings complementary capabilities and scale to the CloudClevr Group, further underpinning our technical capabilities across a converged portfolio."

LDC-backed Aspire Technology Solutions has snapped up Glasgow-based MSP Cloud Cover IT. The deal strengthens Aspire's presence in Scotland and sees Cloud Cover IT's software development and applications division rebranded as Flyte. Aspire CEO Chris Fraser stated: "The Cloud Cover team will become an integral part of the Aspire Group and we believe we can grow significantly in this key strategic market." Aspire serves over 1,700 customers and has a circa 250 headcount. It has offices in Gateshead, London, Leeds and Teesside.

How will analytics and AI change the future of the channel – and the workplace?

In a survey we did for Comms Vision - 66 per cent of MSPs/resellers don't sell analytics and barely any cited AI as a future focus area for them. To what extent is the channel missing an opportunity? And does the channel in general need to get better at bringing new products and services to market?

In this session we'll be asking; Where are the current big opportunities for AI solutions and analytics in the SMB space? How can resellers/MSPs use AI and analytics within their own businesses today? And is this the best way to get to grips the technology? How long will it be before AI and analytics become a mainstream differentiator in markets like contact centre, cloud and security?

Join the debate!
To participate in this editorial round table contact **Heather Miles** on **07955 313 700** or **hmiles@bpl-business.com** for full details.

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NEWS ROUNDUP

WESTCON-Comstor's cloud migration strategy has received a boost following its acquisition of AWS service firm Rebura. The deal enables Westcon-Comstor partners to provide AWS solutions including cloud consultancy, migration services, FinOps, AWS Marketplace and professional services. "Migrating workloads to the cloud and maintaining security resilience are two of the biggest challenges faced by businesses," said Westcon-Comstor CEO David Grant. "But many of our partners do not have the AWS migration and security skills needed to support their customers on this journey. Through this acquisition they will be able to access these capabilities."

FOCUS Group has added significant healthcare sector capabilities to its portfolio stack through the acquisition of RPM Communications which has delivered technology solutions to NHS practices and surgeries for over 15 years. The deal builds on Focus Group's Think Healthcare division. Matt Hill, Regional Director at Focus Group, commented: "When the opportunity arose to enhance our capabilities and bolster our offerings the decision to integrate RPM Communications into Think Healthcare was easy. The RPM team brings a valuable synergy of knowledge, technology and industry-specific insight."

THIS year will see spending on IT services surpass expenditure on comms services for the first time, according to Gartner. The think tank says worldwide IT spending is expected to total $5tr in 2024, an increase of 6.8% from 2023. "Enterprises continue to find more uses for technology, and IT has moved out of the back office, through the front office and is now revenue producing," stated John-David Lovelock, Analyst at Gartner. "Until there is a plateau for how and where technology can be used in an enterprise there cannot be a plateau in enterprise IT spending."

US-BASED Dura Software has acquired Invosys, which was founded in 2006 and provides comms solutions globally. "Invosys is Dura's 17th acquisition and deepens our focus on the UK market and the telecom services segment," stated Dura Software CEO Paul Salisbury. Incoming CEO of Invosys Jane Anderson added: "The resources and expertise that Dura Software affords our company enables us to accelerate growth and enhance our product offerings."

GCC acquired by Xperience

BOWMARK Capital-backed Xperience has boosted its business application play with the acquisition of GCC.

The managed IT services provider supports over 600 clients in complementary sectors to Xperience including not for profit, professional services, wholesale, distribution and financial services.

The deal is Xperience's third in 24 months and its first since Bowmark Capital invested in the business in November 2022.

In two years the group's headcount has more than doubled to over 230 employees, client numbers have increased to 1,400 and turnover is now in excess of £30m.

The GCC acquisition also broadens Xperience's network of offices including Peterborough, Bury St Edmunds, Glasgow, Lisburn, London and Gloucester.

Xperience CEO Iain O'Kane commented: "The acquisition is strategically important as Xperience continues to build out its business application capabilities while broadening its footprint in the UK."

Iain O'Kane

Chris Harthman, CEO, GCC, added: "Our ambition has always been to join forces with a company that shared our values and could continue to support our business strategy."

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NEWS ROUNDUP

MICROSOFT'S removal of the 300 seat purchase minimum for Copilot means that its AI-powered virtual assistant is now available to small businesses – and according to Carl Oliver, Head of Product at Giacom, Copilot for Microsoft 365 represents a big opportunity for the channel. "Giacom was part of the early access programme and businesses using the beta version highlighted its capabilities, with 70% of users saying Copilot had made them more productive and 68 per cent reporting that it had improved the quality of their work," said Oliver. "Partners can use AI to create intelligent data-driven solutions and save businesses time, money and stress."

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Kick ICT gets LDC backing

AN INVESTMENT by PE firm LDC into Kick ICT is set to catalyse the Scottish MSP's bid to expand UK-wide.

The deal also sees the exit of growth capital investor BGF which has backed Kick ICT since 2021.

Based in Bellshill, North Lanarkshire, Kick ICT provides IT managed, communications and digital transformation services to over 1,000 customers across a range of sectors.

The company, which employs over 170 staff, specialises in business and finance solutions from Microsoft and Infor, alongside modern infrastructure, cloud and IT support.

Kick ICT was founded in 2015 and has pursued an acquisitive growth strategy.

In November 2023 it made its ninth acquisition – Dundee-based C2 Software – to expand its Microsoft Dynamics offering to customers across the UK.

Kick ICT CEO Tom O'Hara stated: "Our business has achieved exceptional growth over the last few years. We've continued to invest in our technology and people, and brought a number of innovative companies into the group to expand the range of services and levels of expertise that we provide."

Lee Donaldson, Investment Director at LDC in Scotland, added: "The rapid pace of digitalisation means businesses like Kick ICT will be at the forefront of growth across the UK ICT sector in the years ahead."

Kick ICT in profile – page 14

Tom O'Hara

King honours TalkTalk Dame

TALKTALK Group CEO Tristia Harrison has received a Damehood for services to telecommunications in King Charles III's New Year's Honours List.

The official citation referred to her leadership role during the pandemic, connecting Nightingale hospitals at pace and 'providing critical national infrastructure to keep millions of customers connected'.

Harrison was also commended for the 'significant attention' she has dedicated to recruiting, promoting and inspiring more women into the technology sector, for which she was awarded an honorary doctorate from the University of Salford in 2022.

Harrison's commitment to charitable work was also reflected in the nomination, including her current role as Chair of Trustees at Crisis (the national homelessness charity) and over 10 years on the board of Comic Relief, as well as her roles as Honorary Trustee at Ambitious about Autism and co-founder and CEO at Internet Matters, the online safety charity.

Harrison, who is 'humbled' to have been nominated for this honour, commented: "I have spent over 20 years in tele-

Tristia Harrison

coms and as a team at TalkTalk we have championed affordable connectivity, invested in Greater Manchester and encouraged more women into telecoms and technology.

"I would like to thank everyone at TalkTalk, in UK telecoms and across the various charities I've worked with for this prestigious recognition."

TalkTalk Group Chairman Sir Charles Dunstone added: "Tristia has been central to UK telecoms during the last 20 years. In addition, recognition of Tristia's work to invest in Greater Manchester and centralise TalkTalk's activities there alongside encouraging more women into technology make this award well deserved."

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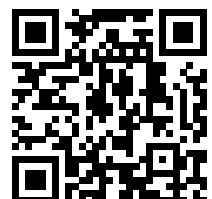- **Automatic call recording & data capture**
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Why The DEX Digital Employee Experience Can Drive Business Success

The world of technology never stands still, generating many new acronyms and buzzwords. Some of you might not be aware of DEX but the digital employee experience is set to become an even more important building block this year, to drive businesses further forward.

In today's modern and dynamic workplace, providing the tools that enable people to perform to their best is ever more crucial. Agility, flexibility and working smarter are the hallmarks of higher productivity and a happier and more engaged workforce.

In many ways, the pandemic dramatically accelerated hybrid working and proved that people can effectively operate from anywhere, anytime. The Digital Employee Experience [DEX] has a vital role to play. The way people work has changed forever, and user expectations have changed too.

Quality Counts

The mobile phone, for example, is the modern worker's 'office in their pocket'. High-quality collaboration wherever people are, relies on the correct tools to do the job. This not only maximises productivity but creates a rewarding and engaging employee experience. There's a rising dependency on digital tools to empower remote workers which allows them to be fully integrated.

Many factors need to be combined to optimise DEX. Platform integrity, security, and reliability as well as ease of use and system simplicity all matter. It's so important to adopt a user-centric approach rather than a 'one size fits all' ethos. At Evolve IP everything is costed and tailored per-person and per-user. Some businesses might need CRM integration and soft phone ability whilst others prefer a physical phone and call recording. The ability to mix and match solutions and products provides the user with the best of both worlds.

Everything we do operates on a carrier-grade platform

with the ability to monitor the performance of each device and component to their collaboration suite. Quality counts. Certainly, over the last 12 months, this has become more important. Wherever people are working they demand the same levels of performance on a conference, voice or wider collaboration platform. Do not underestimate the value of the user's end point.

Technology never stands still and as a service provider, we are continuously expanding and adapting to the UC landscape. This year will see the impact of AI enabling people to perform even better. PCI compliance is changing too. We've also recently announced a closer working relationship with headset and conferencing manufacturer, Jabra. We share many synergies which can help bolster the support we can offer to our customers and their customers too – to further optimise the digital experience which boosts productivity and staff morale.

Saturated Market

Cloud technology is moving quickly but in an increasingly saturated market resellers need to stand out from the crowd to continue to win new business and nullify the threat of a commoditised channel. We understand the dangers of a 'race to the bott' where the cheapest tender always wins purely on price alone.

Many providers can make a phone ring but it's about applying different layers of service and tools that can streamline business operations to make them more productive and successful. Surviving in a saturated market is getting harder but the rewards can be bigger than ever.

A bespoke offering is the key to success. People have different ways of working, different ways of thinking and varying expectations. Technology should always be tailored to the industry and person. DEX is one of many ways to ensure this happens.

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Merger aids fibre access

IN A BID to establish Strategic Imperatives' Fibre Café platform as the dominant solution for ISPs to access wholesale fibre networks the company has merged with services and technology business X3T.

X3T was launched last year by telecom investors Granahan McCourt Capital with financial backing from Asterion Industrial Partners, Oak Hill Advisors, Tetrad and Twin Point Capital – and its platform is purpose built for wholesale networks to facilitate integrations for ISPs.

Strategic Imperatives MD Wail Sabbagh said: "Combining forces with X3T brings together some of the industry's most experienced talent and state-of-the-art technologies. The merger supports our vision to expand our monetisation, billing and subscriptions platform, Elevate, and make Fibre Café the dominant unified interface to the UK's fibre ecosystem."

David McCourt, Chairman of Granahan McCourt Capital and X3T, added: "For over 30

Wail Sabbagh

years we have been building and operating large scale networks across the world, and a decade ago we built one of the first open access networks and quickly grew it to serve over 70 ISPs.

"In our next venture, National Broadband Ireland, we continued to build the next generation of our technology platform, supporting the integration of 62 global and regional ISPs with customer take-up of over 50% within 18 months.

"This merger means we can share this knowledge and accelerate our support for customers in the UK and beyond."

boxxe boosts corporate play with Total Computers scoop

YORK-based IT services business boxxe has boosted its corporate market play with the acquisition of Total Computers. boxxe owner Phil Doye acquired a minority stake in Total in 2022.

Total Computers accelerated its own digital transformation journey in the same year with its acquisition of Overbright.

Doye acquired boxxe in 2019 and he expects 2023 revenue to be circa £440m.

Total Computers CEO Aidan Groom stated: "The acquisition allows both companies to grow faster and become more rel-

Phil Doye

evant to customers through a wider range of accreditations, deeper technical skills, greater financial strength and scale."

Total MD Kevin Goodall added: "Customers want to do more with us but we didn't have the financial scale or range

of partner certifications. Being part of the boxxe group gives us a more complete portfolio and the financial scale to think bigger and be more ambitious."

Doye commented: "I had known and admired Total for many years, but as a shareholder and director for the past 12 months I have seen firsthand the depth of what Aidan and Kevin have built. With the acceleration of digital transformation, the continued growth of public cloud and the proliferation of software companies it's critical that a partner can deliver across this landscape."

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Jola scores perfect goal

Nottinghamshire-based mobile data specialist Jola pledged its commitment to The Big Goal from the outset as the initiative to help young homeless people chimes perfectly with the company's own culture, according to Chief Marketing Officer Cherie Howlett. "Jola is delighted to be a founding member of The Big Goal, which is known for its holistic approach to youth development, aligning perfectly with Jola's commitment to fostering positive change and wellbeing," she commented.

"Football is a passion for many at Jola and after England won the Women's Euros in 2022 it has become even more of a talking point in the office. By supporting the Big Goal we're helping vulnerable young people in our community who may one day work in the industry. This initiative focuses on imparting

Cherie Howlett

valuable skills and changing lives for the better, which I think we can all get on-board with."

Vital support

The Big Goal, working alongside The Street Soccer Foundation (SSF) and main sponsor Giacom, is tackling youth homelessness with the support of clubs across The Premier League and English Football League (EFL)

by equipping individuals with the skills and support they need for a brighter future. "We love football, we love this cause and we didn't need to be asked twice to get involved," added Jola Chairman Andrew Dickinson. "Homelessness, particularly among young people, is a solvable problem. The UK's ICT channel is a powerful community and Tez O'Brien from Giacom and

Nigel Sergent from Comms Dealer are just the figureheads to galvanise us to make a real difference."

Plans are now being drawn up for The Big Goal five-a-side tournament with 40 teams from the founding members set to take part in regional heats, culminating in a finals day at St George's Park – the home of England football – early this summer. "Companies across the ICT industry can still get involved by sponsoring SSF academies which will provide enormous potential for PR and the recruitment of young talent," commented Sergent. ■

For more information on The Big Goal visit www.thebiggoal.co.uk

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SME champ aims high

In November 2016 when the then CEO of Adept Telecom Ian Fishwick was appointed to represent the comms industry as part of the Cabinet Office SME Panel he guaranteed 'a voice at the top table'. Now, he is aiming higher.

Ian Fishwick

Put simply, we nag constantly for improvements and ensure the Government does not lose interest

The SME Panel is a group of business leaders from different industries drawn together to advise the Government on how to make it easier for SMEs to win public sector business. And on 6th December last year Panel members entered 10 Downing Street to meet Frank Petitgas, Rishi Sunak's Special Advisor on Business Policy. "A few months ago the Prime Minister set up a new Business Advisory Council," noted Fishwick.

"Many of us were frustrated that it just contained CEOs of FTSE-100 companies. I asked whether he would consider one of the SME Panel joining the Business Advisory Council as small and medium sized businesses employ 50 per cent of the workforce, and we want our voice heard at the top table. Gaining access to the man who set up the Business Advisory Council is great. But let's see what happens."

Fingers crossed. But what is more certain is that Government spend with SMEs is now at the highest level since records began, pointed out Fishwick. He noted that SME central Government procurement spend figures are published annually, and the latest set of results show that £21 billion went to SMEs during 2021-2022, an increase of £1.7 billion on the previous year. "Nine central Government departments are now spending over 33 per cent of their money with SMEs, compared to just three in 2017-2018," commented Fishwick. "Every central Government department now has a SME Champion who ensures they have a clear SME plan showing how they intend to increase spend with small and medium-sized businesses."

During the last year the Cabinet Office SME Panel has made significant contributions and catalysed important changes, such as gaining Royal Assent for the new Procurement Act which will likely come into force in Autumn this year. "There is a new duty on contracting authorities to understand the barriers SMEs face and consider how to remove them," added Fishwick. "Our role is to provide feedback on the actions Government is taking to remove procurement barriers and increase spend with SMEs. Put simply, we nag constantly for improvements and ensure the Government does not lose interest."

Sharpening focus
The SME Panel played a key role in giving this new Act a SME focus, which was sharpened in October last year when ministers held a round table to discuss ways to further help small firms. "A good example of the progress we have made is around issues relating to insurance," explained Fishwick. "Until now, all bidders had to show they held the required insurance cover before they were allowed to submit a bid. Given there can only normally be one winner of a tender this meant that many losing bidders had to take out unnecessary and expensive insurance policies.

"This cost of bidding, with no guarantee of winning any work, caused many smaller suppliers to shy away from Government bids as they were too costly and risky. This has now been fixed and you will only need to agree that you will take out the required insurance cover if you win the tender."

Fishwick noted that SME Panel members continue to play a key role in the review of supplier facing learning and development products for the new procurement regime. This includes the recent launch of the Knowledge Drop which sets out changes to existing procurement regulations and the steps SMEs can take to prepare for the new Act which is expected to be implemented in October this year. At the same time, Fishwick expects a new Tell Me Once system to be introduced. "No longer will a supplier have to submit the same information every time they respond to a tender," he added. "Documents such as statutory accounts, insurance certificates and carbon reduction plans will only need to be updated annually and will be held on a central web portal."

Fishwick also highlighted that in the last Autumn Statement the Chancellor announced a new condition that any company bidding for large Government contracts should pay their own invoices within an average of 55 days, or risk being excluded. "Prompt payment has been a top priority for the SME Panel as cash flow is critical for any small business," added Fishwick. "These new rules have been incorporated in a new Procurement Policy Notice – PPN 10/23."

Aside from making progress on higher profile issues such as procurement, the SME Panel also does much work in the background. For example, reviewing and suggesting SME-friendly changes to standard Government terms and conditions. "Sometimes when you are dealing with Government it feels like you are trying to change the direction of an oil tanker," commented Fishwick. "But if you look at the changes that have been made during the past five years it all seems very worthwhile." ∎

MSP Kick ICT boots up ex

Already an active acquirer in the IT and comms space, Scottish tech firm Kick ICT has catalysed its growth strategy following an investment deal that puts the company on track to become one of the UK's leading MSPs of scale, according to CEO Tom O'Hara who's targeting a £50 million run rate by 2025.

Tom O'Hara

Last month's investment by LDC into North Lanarkshire-based Kick ICT saw the exit of growth capital investor BGF (which had backed Kick ICT since 2021) and boosts an expansion strategy that first took hold when the company was established in 2015 by O'Hara. "We have grown from £800,000 turnover in 2015 to £29 million today," he stated. "Our ambition is to achieve a £50 million run rate by 2025 generated through a combination of acquisitions and organic growth. We have a target list and LDC's investment and support will help us accelerate UK-wide by acquiring complementary businesses in Scotland and the north of England."

In November 2023 Kick ICT made its ninth acquisition – Dundee-based C2 Software – to expand its Microsoft Dynamics offering.

The transaction builds on previous deals including the purchase of Dynamics partner Talon Business Solutions, accountancy software firm Roxxap, Dynamics consultancy Vozero, comms firm Clyde Solutions, tech companies Castle Computer Services, Turnkey Business Software, Turnkey Infrastructure Solutions and Consilium (UK). "These acquisitions alongside strong organic growth have been the key elements in our ability to scale and expand the range of services and levels of expertise that Kick provides," added O'Hara.

Kick ICT now has five specialist divisions – Technical, Dynamics, Infor, Communications and KickSecure – and together they provide a springboard for the Scottish MSP's bid to expand UK-wide. "We are a cloud first business with a UK focus

We have a target list and LDC's investment and support will help us accelerate UK-wide by acquiring complementary businesses in Scotland and the north of England

on developing, consulting, deploying and supporting business applications and network infrastructure solutions for organisations of all sizes," explained O'Hara. "Our business applications specialisms are Microsoft Dynamics and Infor SunSystems. Within

Technical we are primarily a Microsoft house with a range of complementary enterprise level products like data centre, VMWare and Citrix, while our communications division is at the forefront of UC solutions, providing a digital platform for today's modern workplace."

O'Hara claims that Kick ICT's business model is a differentiator that sets it apart, supported by a well defined and established set of operational KPIs covering sales, consultancy, support and cash, as well as a major focus on driving recurring revenue and margin across

xpansion drive

all divisions. Today, more than 70 per cent of Kick ICT's revenue is recurring and the associated margin covers well in excess of 80 per cent of

Our ambition is to achieve a £50 million run rate by 2025 generated through acquisitions and organic growth

its operating costs. "We are significantly cash positive and our profitability percentage positions us favourably alongside UK peers and competitors," added O'Hara.

Opportunities
Kick ICT now employs over 170 staff who provide IT managed, communications and digital transformation services to 1,000-plus customers across a range of sectors, with services delivered via Kick's five divisions. According to O'Hara, these business units are reflective of the key trends and opportunities in today's market.

"In terms of Dynamics there is a clear shift to SaaS for the provision of ERP, customer applications and power platform digitisation," he stated. "And as Microsoft continues to invest and grow market share, as a Microsoft Solutions partner we are positioned to help existing customers with their application set roadmap as well as adding new customers."

Regarding Infor, O'Hara noted that following the acquisition by Koch Industries there is a sharp focus on cloud products and SaaS. "Our data centre capability for third party add on products for Sun customers positions us well alongside Infor to take advantage of this strategic cloud initiative," he added.

The rise of remote working and cloud-based collaboration technologies like Microsoft Teams following the pandemic provided a spur for another of Kick's specialisms – Technical and Comms. "Organisations require a functional, secure and resilient communications backbone as well as increasingly sophisticated cyber protection technologies to keep them safe and operational in the face of a myriad of business damaging threats," commented O'Hara. "Our skillsets in such technologies enables us to operate as a managed services partner throughout the UK."

These strategic threads all weave into Kick's shared vision and culture of building a sustainable single source UK-wide IT services business of scale, noted O'Hara. "Our foundation is strong, underpinned by our 'we're here to help' philosophy and brand values of Personal, People and Progressive," he commented. "While Kick ICT acknowledges the digital and technological requirements of modern day businesses, our interactions with people are what matter most to us, along with maintaining the entrepreneurial spirit that epitomises the business." ∎

Just a minute with Tom O'Hara...

Role model: No single person. I've picked up my dos and don'ts from a number of individuals along the way.

Tell us something about yourself we don't know: Whisky collecting is one of my favourite hobbies. I currently own 164 bottles, spanning 113 distilleries and the oldest bottle is 30 years old.

Your main strength and what could you work on? According to HR, I am determined, confident and ambitious, but could work on my patience.

Three ideal dinner guests: My three favourites – actress Julia Roberts, footballer Jimmy Johnstone and comedian Billy Connolly.

If you weren't in ICT what would you be doing? Buying and selling whisky.

Best advice you have been given: The next thing you do, make sure that you run it. This triggered my move from finance to my life as a CEO.

What do you fear most? The growing threat of cyber security breaches. The rapid evolution of cyber threats poses a significant challenge to protecting clients' data.

The biggest risk you have taken: Giving up my comfortable job as an accountant and taking the plunge to be an owner director in a tech company.

Name one challenge that you have overcome: I started university at the age of 16 to study accountancy and finance, and almost chucked it in after six weeks as I was homesick and too young.

Top tip for resellers: Focus on building strong, trust-based relationships with your customers. In a market where products and technologies are rapidly evolving and competition is intense, the quality of customer relationships is key.

Jola mobilises big deals

Jola's immediate priority this year is to accelerate partner growth through the maximisation of 'bigger and better' IoT and mobile data deals, according to CEO Adrian Sunderland.

Adrian Sunderland

Wireless Logic acquired Jola in July 2022 to consolidate routes to market through a focused UK channel, and supercharged by the parent company's additional resources Jola has embarked on an action plan to deliver partners' IoT and mobile data deals which have reached 'eye-watering' levels, says Sunderland. New research by Jola points up the scale of the opportunity with mobile data rated as the fastest growing connectivity sector in the world. Furthermore, Sunderland believes that every partner has at least one IoT or M2M opportunity in their existing customer base.

"Jola added over 200 new resellers in 2023," stated Sunderland. "Resellers are looking for high recurring margin products to sell to existing customers and mobile data fits the bill. Big companies have partnered with us and the pipeline they have generated is eye-watering. In the next five months our efforts will be going into helping them close and deliver these deals."

Sunderland also noted that Jola is leveraging Wireless Logic's wider solution set to add new products and features to its mobile and SIP Manager portals. Jola also provides 100 per cent real-time DDOS protection for its public IP address space using CloudFlare and now blocks thousands of DDOS attacks and intrusion attempts every month. As part of the Wireless Logic group it also has a 24x7x365 Security Operations Centre. "We've leveraged traction from channel-ready versions of some of Wireless Logic's most innovative products," added Sunderland. "Resellers are enjoying ARPUs of £10-£15 on projects involving hundreds and thousands of SIMs. So it's not surprising that many of them are trying to add as much contracted IoT to their base as possible and look like an IoT company rather than a generalist."

Sunderland highlighted that the public sector is 'red hot' for IoT contracts, and he pointed to sizeable opportunities within the retail, logistics, healthcare and private transport sectors. "Jola was recently approached by a large metropolitan council to bid for a transport project," noted Sunderland. "We never sell direct so engaged one of our partners which then won a multi-million-pound contract to supply tracking, scheduling and communication services to a variety of transport operations over several years. Also, we recently completed a public transport project with one of our partners where we delivered a private mobile data network that was interconnected into the customer's IoT application in AWS cloud, in parallel to delivering a 5G public mobile data network. The whole project was subject to strict cybersecurity policies."

Switch off opportunities

Another hotbed of IoT and mobile opportunities has been ignited by the 2025 PSTN switch off which has sparked much of Jola's innovation roadmap as it seeks to plug gaps exposed where fixed line upgrades are either insufficient, unavailable or not the right option. "Not every location where PSTN exists would necessarily need broadband, yet all the industry standard solutions assume that the switch off means fibre broadband and VoIP," observed Sunderland. "So we leveraged our experience of delivering mission critical mobile data together with our wholesale IP telephony capabilities and created a single box PSTN replacement product that can be installed anywhere and costs less per month than the PSTN line it is replacing."

Another fixed line alternative opportunity was spotlighted in December last year when Ofcom reported that full fibre is available to 56 per cent of homes while 5G is available to 85 per cent. "We've seen 5G compatible tariffs drop in price along with 5G devices to the point where 5G and LTE-A services can be a viable and cost-effective alternative to fixed line in many customer situations," added Sunderland.

The benefits of adopting IoT and mobile solutions versus the standard approach is also clear for all to see when you consider that IoT and M2M EBITDA multiples can be as high as 28x versus more typical IT and telecom valuations of 8x-10x, noted Sunderland. He also attaches multiples of value to Jola's staff share scheme which also holds much promise (every employee hired before its acquisition by Wireless Logic held share options) . "This has created a collaborative atmosphere and everyone is pushing in the same direction to help partners deliver bigger and better mobile deals," stated Sunderland. ∎

Resellers are looking for high recurring margin products to sell to existing customers and mobile data fits the bill

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Are you out of the UCaaS

Taking a big-picture view of the UCaaS landscape, how it's developing, and gauging the role of channel partners in meeting the demands of this fast evolving market is critical to success, says Iain Sinnott, Head of International Carrier Sales, Enreach for Service Providers.

Iain Sinnott

Establishing the best route to growth requires a clear view of all markets within the business communications and IT sphere, and among the most pressing challenges is getting to grips with the full potential of UCaaS. In a survey of reseller business leaders conducted by Comms Dealer only 10 per cent identify themselves as specialists in UC or UCaaS, which Sinnott says makes sense because these are no longer standalone products and increasingly exist as one of the five or six critical pillars in a business technologies portfolio aimed at delivering process and productivity improvements, security and enhanced human performance. "That statistic reflects that UC is part of a bigger picture," he stated.

It's also no surprise to Sinnott that many long established channel organisations that have grown up in a telco-centric world are seeing substantial challenges in sales and support around UCaaS. "What was once a reasonably static product set has

expanded in many directions in a short space of time," he stated. "UCaaS and the portfolio of associated applications represent a learning curve for traditional resellers, and transitioning from being subject experts to students represents a big change, especially for more senior staff members who have been in the industry for a long time.

"While it may be understandable for a profitable salesperson not to enter the new world unless that traditional approach to selling telecoms changes, the business does risk being left behind. Also, more junior members are hungry to grow their careers and are open to embracing new technologies and business models. Alongside them are the new market entrants who may see a new, disruptive way of gaining revenue from UC."

Against this backdrop, many resellers and MSPs are finding the commercial principles of UCaaS difficult to work with compared to the model they have

The challenge is keeping pace as competitors move from capex to opex selling. Meanwhile, new entrants from more SaaS-native market sectors are adding UCaaS and CCaaS to their solutions portfolio

operated for many years, both in terms of general company overheads and the commission structures of their more expensive sales team assets. "As a result, capital sale products may have been retained in the mix longer than is appropriate, taking some flexibility out of customer solutions," noted Sinnott.

"The challenge is keeping pace as competitors move from capex to opex selling while new entrants from more SaaS-native market sectors add

UCaaS and CCaaS to their solutions portfolios."

Strategic planning
While Sinnott believes that a SaaS provision of voice and call centre services is the most sustainable way forward, he also says that a reseller or MSP's strategic planning should be based on their existing or prospective target customers. "But while voice will remain a key focus for customers for the next couple of years, once the list of telephony features from multiple vendors becomes ubiquitous those

elements will rapidly become commoditised, negatively affecting margins," he added. "This is why the longer-term goal should be to select a UCaaS solution that can integrate and partner with mobile, collaboration, omnichannel chat and CRM integration tools."

Sinnott observes that resellers achieving greater value in UCaaS have also widened the scope of customer support and reduced the focus on any one element. "Customers will pay more for a supportive supply partner than the sum

frame?

of the price of the products they supply," he added. "This is why developing an IT side to the business, including connectivity, mobile and professional services, and concentrating on customer outcomes – not pushing products for their own sake – is the way to build both value and loyalty, contributing to a more robust and sustainable future."

Portfolio expansion
Surrounding UCaaS with as many other monthly recurring revenue (MRR) products like connectivity, security, standard mobile etc will increase the reseller or MSP's ability to afford the level of service and account management that SaaS portfolios require, observed Sinnott. He also noted that customer productivity should be the specialism with UCaaS functioning as an enabling tool, and customer engagement the differentiator. "Collectively, we must understand where the customer derives benefits and bring technology to bear on what matters to them," he said. "Otherwise, as people become more financially conscious it is impossible to create a budget."

The key driver for every end user business is how technology will help them grow revenue, reduce customer churn, increase staff productivity, decrease staff churn, achieve a high NPS, hit green and social targets, and protect their cash position. In practice, says Sinnott, this means blending voice and non-voice services to simplify customer engagement while delivering tools that support workplace flexibility and collaboration. "For instance, voice call centres are now

transitioning into a blend of voice and chat or email options," he stated. "But as the potential of AI starts to be understood there is much to do in preparing the end customers' businesses to take advantage of the technology.

"Accurate, secure and intelligent data is the future foundation of AI, and there is an increasing consensus that CRM integration holds the key to capturing more information and insight into customer engagement and preferences. As a result, AI will be better positioned to replace low level tasks to release human intelligence to be used when complexity, care or empathy obtain the highest reward. However, this is a journey, not a one-time action, so understanding the interaction between UCaaS and CCaaS is imperative."

Support matters
The traditional vendor and service provider relationship with resellers is predicated on the reseller providing the sales and marketing effort while taking on first line support and customer management. Consequently, noted Sinnott, vendors and service providers are often not structured to step in and support their partners in a new way of working. "This is why it is vital to look at investment by both vendors and service providers to help their channel re-equip, learn, and transform because it is hard for many resellers and MSPs to bring in the expertise or deliver the staff training needed," said Sinnott. "Partnering well with vendors and service providers with a vested interest in long-term success is essential, based on everyone pulling together and not driven by a short-term sales performance." ∎

Time to harness UCaaS potential

UCaaS solutions are essential for business collaboration in today's hybrid world and the market continues to expand, writes Gavin Jones, Channel Partners Director, BT Wholesale.

Microsoft Teams now has over 320 million monthly active users and BT Wholesale's research with Cavell found that 50 per cent of UK small businesses use it every day. And with the Unified Communications market set to be worth an estimated £155.04 billion by 2030, there's a massive growth opportunity for resellers and MSPs. However, you don't need to be a UCaaS specialist to support customers. To maximise the opportunity and succeed, resellers and MSPs should find a pathway that enables them to focus on their relationship with customers and leverage the expertise of vendors to support them.

Collaboration between UCaaS providers and channel partners is pivotal to unlocking untapped market potential. To help the channel, UCaaS vendors must refrain from a hands-off approach. Vendors have the product expertise while the channel is closer to the customer. Therefore, they must provide easy to understand content for teams to enhance their knowledge and equip them with the tools and guidance for selling. It's also important that vendors are use case focused and work closely with partners. This will not only open

Gavin Jones

the door to more business opportunities but ensure a seamless customer journey.

Adding value
In terms of market trends, the pandemic saw a huge uptick in UCaaS solutions as organisations adapted to remote working. And while most businesses have embraced video calls and live document sharing, many often overlook value add features that can make a big difference to ways of working. For example, a fraud management system can block unwanted calls while call analytics software enables employees to focus on their day-to-day activities.

There are a range of platforms and collaborative solutions in the market for channel partners to embrace, and specific use cases are evolving with advances in technology. The potential for them to shake up the

current landscape is huge, and success ultimately boils down to a customer focused selling approach over pure product. Resellers and MSPs wanting to gain a competitive advantage in the UCaaS market must also be agile. High level service is a number one priority for most businesses, so resellers need to ensure they are giving customers the communication tools they need to succeed. Resellers and MSPs that can provide tailored and robust solutions with agility will come out on top.

Working together to build the right digital solutions for businesses is critical in this day and age. The most important asset is time – so resellers and MSPs must ensure they are making customers' lives simpler and easier. That's why communication and innovation is key. ∎

Why UCaaS traction lags

The scale of the UCaaS market has been much hyped in the channel but the fact remains that few resellers and MSPs are fully realising the hypothesised potential. Here, UCaaS experts unravel why resellers and MSPs are, in the main, yet to embrace the technology as a core specialism – and they underscore the criticality of strategic partnerships for UCaaS success.

In a survey of reseller and MSP business leaders Comms Dealer undertook to support content at Comms Vision in November last year, nearly 55 per cent of respondents said they are either not addressing UCaaS opportunities or are stymied by support challenges. And just ten per cent defined themselves as specialists in UC and UCaaS. "The statistics Comms Dealer has uncovered mirror how many resellers and MSP businesses have become confused by what is deemed to be a UCaaS solution, creating hesitancy," stated Jeff Green, CEO, Elisha Telecom. "Communication purists will tell you that UCaaS is a single system which handles all channels – but that is more like the definition of omnichannel. Others will highlight the integration of multiple applications to 'unify' the various workflows owned by agents. In our opinion, it's both... unifying all comms into one platform and unifying the workflows."

It's enterprises and larger companies with specialised needs, such as the consolidation of channels for reporting purposes and security that mainly demand UCaaS solutions, says Green. "SMEs stand to gain little from UCaaS, mainly due to the implementation costs and the complexities of managing the technology," he added. "Not having the internal resources to handle the additional communication channels makes UCaaS unfeasible economically or operationally. But there will always be those larger businesses with the budget and need for UCaaS that are yet to benefit from the transition away from traditional telephony. And resellers that have got to grips with UCaaS are helping them to understand what is possible. However, resellers shouldn't promote themselves as UCaaS specialists unless that is truly their focus."

According to Green, the key enabler is to find an established supplier that has the time and resources to support resellers through the UCaaS journey, enabling them to learn the technical possibilities and best practices to sell, manage and secure services. "Resellers will no doubt encounter UCaaS opportunities and working closely with a technically capable UCaaS partner that can confidently uncover the client's needs will be necessary to not only impress the customer and close the opportunity, but fulfil it too," he added.

According to Green, future growth in the UCaaS space will in large part centre on AI which he tips as being

Jeff Green

As solutions continue to be productised with scalability and compatibility in mind, resellers will become more confident in offering and managing UCaaS

a 'game changer'. "Not only will AI enable faster workflows it will speed up the creation and optimisation of integrations through AI-powered code," he stated. "In turn, this will open the door for smaller companies to benefit from UCaaS by eliminating the need for additional resources to link and manage the new channels, while conversational AI generates more engaging and human-like content for end users, reducing costs throughout the chain of supply."

Maturing market
Green also observed that several major UCaaS players are now dominating the market, and more importantly their products are maturing. "As solutions continue to be productised with scalability and compatibility in mind, resellers will become more confident in offering and managing UCaaS," he said.

Jamie Hughes, UK Sales Director, Evolve IP, attributes the failure of some resellers to make the most of UCaaS to them only having a limited set of solutions, meaning that they are constrained in their ability to meet all customer requirements. "A dual vendor strategy is a big advantage because it provides choice and ways to capture more revenue," he said. "Certainly, the conversations we had at Comms Vision highlighted how some resellers need additional services that their primary vendor cannot facilitate."

Hughes also emphasised that UCaaS shouldn't be overlooked as it has a fundamental role to play in the wider IT and connectivity arena which is becoming more consultative led. In this context, a limited tech portfolio can lead to inflexibility and support challenges. "Resellers should be thinking more seriously about UCaaS," he added. "The world of work has changed dramatically over the last five years and so has the role of a reseller. Many technologies are now interlinked which has accelerated demand for a one-stop-shop approach. Resellers without a strong

s behind the talking up

Mark Pillow

It's clear that the channel isn't making the most of the current opportunities that are ripe for the taking

UCaaS offering leave the door open for a rival to take the opportunity."

Another alarm bell rung by Hughes alerts us to the danger of UCaaS being seen as a commodity solution. "Some will view UCaaS as a secondary rather than a primary sale," he commented. "This is a big mistake. A race to the bottom based purely on price should always be avoided in what can be a saturated market. Adding value is the best way forward."

There are several key reasons why some resellers are doing better than others, noted Hughes. "Firstly, they have an in-depth knowledge of the network," he added. "MSPs are gaining traction away from traditional resellers because they can differentiate and stand out. In general, there's greater customer trust towards an IT reseller

that has more perceived expertise based on a solution sell approach. Having all the solutions in your kit bag is important. This is why working with an experienced specialist that offers diverse and complex solutions is the first step for resellers."

Loss of tech focus

Responding to the survey findings noted above, Mark Pillow, Managing Director, Voip Unlimited, said that because the UCaaS market has been predominantly driven by pricing considerations, as well as the challenges presented by offering comprehensive technical support for integrations, the hesitancy of many resellers to offer those service isn't surprising. "Unfortunately, this has led to a neglect of the technical aspects of the product when customers are increasingly seeking a more integrated approach,

highlighting the need for a shift in strategy," he stated.

According to Pillow, the term UCaaS 'literally implies a unified service', emphasising the need for a cohesive and specialised approach. "Without that knowledge, UCaaS solutions won't integrate seamlessly, leaving customers disappointed and curious as to whether the grass is greener with another supplier," he added. "But technical expertise can't appear overnight. Resellers and MSPs wanting to position themselves as a UCaaS specialist should seek out a provider that can offer a more joined up service and lead them on that journey."

Despite the 'hesitancy' displayed by a large number of resellers to plunge into UCaaS, Pillow says it is too early to tell whether the UCaaS market is actually underserved. "There are some amazing UCaaS products out there," he added. "But from Comm's Dealer's research it's clear that the channel isn't making the most of the current opportunities that are ripe for the taking."

To succeed, the technical focus should extend far beyond mere product integration, pointed out Pillow. "Truly transformative solutions require a thorough understanding of the client's workflow and how the UCaaS platform is just a fraction of the whole solution," he explained. "Resellers should also consider how their experience can be leveraged to modernise, optimise and enhance processes that enable clients to improve their customer experiences. Clearly, resellers succeeding

in the UCaaS space are not simply selling on price."

Growth in the UCaaS market has historically been driven by companies transitioning away from traditional analogue phone systems. But today, companies are increasingly seeking cost savings and productivity enhancements, presenting a significant opportunity for innovative new solutions. "AI is already starting to play a transformative role in the UCaaS market, introducing substantial changes to how services are delivered and experienced," added Pillow. "That will continue as the technology and underlying algorithms mature, enabling further cost savings and productivity boosts for end customers."

Keep control

More broadly, noted Pillow, maintaining control and visibility over communications is imperative for any business.

"The onset of the Covid pandemic saw a decline in data control as employees resorted to using personal devices," he added. "As businesses strive to regain oversight, the challenge lies in accommodating the workforce's preference for mobile working, especially with the rising popularity of hybrid work models. Again, this is where resellers operating as consultants not only stand out from their competitors, but also build longer-term relationships based on trust and positive results."

Dion Smith, Head of EMEA Channel, Zoom, agrees that the cornerstone of any UCaaS solution is the user experience and ongoing support. "Emphasis on reliability, usability and the highest levels of security is paramount," he stated. "But to be successful in the market, resellers need to

Jamie Hughes

Conversations we had at Comms Vision highlighted how some resellers need additional services that their main vendor cannot facilitate

Dion Smith

To establish a notable presence in the UCaaS space resellers need to focus on three core areas... cutting edge technology, customer centric solutions and strategic partnerships

Continued from page 21
keep on top of the latest accreditations and ensure they're fully skilled with the UCaaS solutions they're selling. Picking the right UCaaS platform is key to success and resellers need

to consider features around collaboration, privacy and security. User centric design also needs to be top of mind and is key to winning new customers and, crucially, keeping them. To establish a notable presence in the

UCaaS space, resellers need to focus on three core areas... cutting edge technology, customer centric solutions and strategic partners."

Future growth in the UCaaS space will come from the

increasing integration of value added services like call recording, analytics, softphone and collaboration clients into CRM platforms, and of course AI, believes Claire Makin, Head of Voice Services Portfolio, Giacom. "Advancements in AI are driving the evolution of UCaaS, bringing exciting products to the market," she stated. "And the emergence of affordable, feature rich small contact centre solutions, enhanced with sentiment analysis capabilities, also highlights the expanding opportunities within the sector."

Furthermore, the integration of AI, particularly Large Language Models, is set to revolutionise customer assistance, believes Makin. "AI-based chatbots that enhance user interactions are just the beginning of what is to come," she added. "The biggest opportunity in the UCaaS space lies in leveraging these advancements to provide comprehensive and seamless communication solutions that cater to the evolving needs of businesses."

Makin reiterated that productivity enablement and seamless integration are also significant in terms of market approach. "As costs rise across other industries it's important to demonstrate where a product can help save on expenditure and enable greater productivity benefits," she added. "Reducing workload is a strong message."

The move to cloud technology fuels UC platforms' ability to rapidly adapt to changing needs, noted Makin, who also underscored that to provide a successful UC solution it must be underpinned by quality connectivity and secure working environments. "I do not believe resellers must have a specialism in UC specifically," she added. "They need to have a

specialism in understanding and creating productive workplaces which requires a broad range of skills such as Microsoft Office 365, security, connectivity and voice services."

But when talking to potential partners with a traditional comms background it soon becomes clear to Ian Rowan, UK&I Country Manager, Wildix, that many of them are not just in the dark about UCaaS, they don't understand the as-a-service model at all. "This is why it's important to have a robust, tried and tested onboarding process that helps these partners understand how adopting the as-a-service model can transform their business," he stated. "Onboarding is not just about product, it's a totally different way of selling. That's why we partner with a specialist sales training provider to make sure our partners are not left behind."

Winning deals
Rowan noted that 25 per cent of the potential partners Wildix engages with have no UCaaS offering in their portfolio. But that is no block to progress. "We have seen massive changes in what our partners are offering, and even the smallest of them at the start of their UCaaS journey are winning deals and deploying solutions that were hard to imagine," observed Rowan.

"Yes, partners need product knowledge, but it's more important for the sales team to move to subscription selling while aligning customer business issues with the UCaaS solution. Get that right and keep delivering value and the customer will continue to subscribe to those services until their business requirements change. This is why a UCaaS offering is important: As the needs of a business changes the solution can be modified. This is the key to long-term success."

Claire Makin

As costs rise across industries, it's important to show where a product can help save on expenditure and enable greater productivity

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How to drive more value from UCaaS

The UCaaS market displays a rigid dichotomy between resellers caught in a price war tailspin and those spreading their wings with a business outcome-led approach, observes TelcoSwitch Chief Marketing Officer Simon Blackwell.

Ian Rowan

Moving into UC is not the issue, it's the as-a-service part that partners need to adopt

Rowan also noted that Wildix's resellers are generating the greatest value through vertical specialisation. "We have partners that specialise in law firms, sports and fitness organisations, hospitality and retail," he said. "By becoming the expert in these types of businesses resellers are able to give credibility when supplying the solution and also have a better understanding of how to deliver the value these customers need. These partners make a lot more margin."

Selecting a product that is established, credible and supports verticals and business integrations is key, along with an understanding of how AI fits into the UCaaS mix. "2023 was the year that this technology became mainstream, so if resellers do not have AI as part of their solution they should reconsider their portfolio," said Rowan. "Simple things like a transcript and AI driven summary automatically added to the CRM means that the normal statistic of only retaining 20 per cent of what we hear in a meeting is transformed to 100 per cent. This is a single user case among many that make AI invaluable."

Another big factor for resellers to consider is integrations, especially across vendors, noted Rowan. "Having solutions talk to a wide offering of other business software means that a solutions provider, integrated well, is no longer UCaaS but delivers Business Processes as a Service," concluded Rowan. ∎

According Blackwell, the comms industry is awash with 'me too' UCaaS solutions and all too often resellers are having to compete on price rather than value. "They are forced to seek out equally low cost vendor offerings in a race to the bottom," he stated.

To help resellers break out of this damaging cycle Blackwell recommends a three pronged strategy that delivers greater value. Firstly, he says resellers can leap-frog the competition by deploying solutions with a strong ongoing development roadmap. "Nothing speaks stronger to a customer than a solution that continues to improve and evolve throughout the customer lifecycle, whether that's new features or UI/UX improvements," he explained. "Too many solutions deployed are no different in month 24 or 36 than they were in month one, and that makes the contract resign conversation more complicated. If you can get to the end of a customer contract having shown continued technical improvement in the product you deployed throughout, then the customer will always recognise that value."

The second focus area is to understand the specific needs of vertical markets. "This is especially important in terms of integrations," added Blackwell. "Partners who specialise in certain industries have asked us if we can build a UCaaS integration between our platform and that essential core piece of software used by the majority of legal firms, healthcare providers or other market areas. With a powerful vendor-driven Open-API framework you can intelligently wrap up multiple software products into compelling solutions for dedicated markets, and charge a premium for being the only option."

Speed of delivery
Thirdly, an important facet of the UCaaS mix is how quickly and easily a solution can be delivered to customers. "If you can port numbers and deploy solutions quickly, accurately and with maximum automation that minimises customer involvement you're already ahead of many competitors," said Blackwell.

Simon Blackwell

He also observed that the future of UCaaS, like many software solutions, is inextricably linked to the rise of transformative technologies. Therefore it is crucially important to recognise AI powered tools like virtual assistants, chatbots and analytics that are capable of personalising communications, optimising workflows and presenting data in a quick and actionable format.

"Low code or no code integrations and Open API will enable significant growth opportunities for those vendors with rich enough tech stacks and development competency," added Blackwell. "Those running proprietary code bases over open source are primed to deliver growth-driving solutions to channel partners and their onward customers."

No discussion about UCaaS market growth would be complete without considering Microsoft's strong presence. "Teams remains a major player, particularly within larger enterprise customer bases," commented Blackwell. "Resellers integrating powerful voice solutions over a Teams endpoint will set themselves apart from competitors and render Teams an opportunity rather than a threat." ∎

More room to grow for resellers in UCaaS space

UCaaS remains an untapped opportunity for many ICT resellers but transformational trends in the market will put UC solutions front and centre, believes Matt Worboys, Business Development Director, Gamma.

Readers would have observed by now that this month's magazine provides a deep dive into the reasons why resellers may not be fully grasping the UCaaS opportunity, which has been the subject of much drum beating over the years. This editorial thread was catalysed by a research study undertaken by Comms Dealer which found that just 10 per cent of reseller and MSP business leaders questioned rate themselves as a specialist in UC and UCaaS, while more the half don't have a UCaaS option in their portfolio or are not realising UCaaS opportunities due to support issues.

"It's clear that many are not fully tapping into the UCaaS opportunities," stated Worboys. "This might be due to tech and sales support challenges or a lack of specialisation in UC and UCaaS. But while these stats are surprising they also represent an opportunity. It's our role to support the channel and bring value."

The survey results reflect Gamma's own experience and Worboys urges channel companies to approach the market through a UCaaS lens. "In our experience UCaaS is an underserved space with great potential," he commented. "Resellers

Matt Worboys

The shift to IP, faster connectivity speeds and the impending PSTN switch-off are all contributing to a changing landscape where cloud and UCaaS are becoming central

and MSPs should consider making UCaaS a core specialism because it's a growing market with increasing demand from businesses looking for unified communications solutions.

"Moreover, the shift to IP, faster connectivity speeds and the impending PSTN switch-off are all contributing to a changing landscape where cloud and UCaaS are becoming central. This presents an opportunity for resellers and MSPs

to specialise and provide valuable solutions."

Holistic solutions
Worboys also highlighted that resellers and MSPs who have embraced UCaaS are building greater value for end users by delivering all-encompassing solutions. "It's important to note that different routes to market are key here," he commented. "Collaborating with resellers of different shapes and sizes to determine their market approach is crucial

to success. A one-size-fits-all approach doesn't work."

While there is a significant number of players in this space, Worboys firmly believes that there's plenty of room for growth and specialisation and that partnerships are key to success. "UCaaS providers like Gamma can play a critical role in supporting partners as they navigate the competitive UCaaS landscape," said Worboys. "Knowledge sharing is essential in bridging

the gap and unlocking the market's potential."

Key trends in the UCaaS space, observed Worboys, include the adoption of cloud-based solutions, increased mobility and enhanced security measures. "These trends are significant in how Gamma approaches the market, develops its portfolio and engages with customers and partners," he commented. "Furthermore, the integration of Microsoft solutions and the growing popularity of Contact Centre as a Service are areas of particular interest. We have first-hand experience of how CCaaS is driving more margin and value into the sales process for our channel partners. There's a growing opportunity and these trends influence our strategic direction."

Future growth in the UCaaS space will likely come from businesses realising the full benefits of the technology, especially with the integration of AI which can significantly improve efficiency while personalising the UCaaS experience. "To gain an advantage in the UCaaS market reseller and MSP leaders should focus on specialisation, customer service, staying ahead of trends and collaborating with trusted UCaaS providers," concluded Worboys. ∎

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How 8x8 is gearing up for

Here, 8x8's Regional Vice President for EMEA Channel Sales Emily Masterton shares insights into key aspects of the vendor's technology roadmap and the big themes underpinning its evolving partner enablement and engagement strategy.

Emily Masterton

Traditional partners are not only seeing the shift from legacy to cloud, some are also having to reskill as they move into a managed service offering, particularly as they work out what AI can do for customers

C hanging times in the channel require a close look at the thinking and activities of movers and shakers like 8x8 as well as influential industry figures such as Masterton – who as part of the 8x8 EMEA leadership team for the past four years has introduced new rules of engagement around deal registration and opportunity progression, driven growth of the Elevate programme in EMEA, and was named one of Channel Futures' Top 20 EMEA Channel Leaders of the Year. Previously at Unify (where she was Vice President - Atos UCC Business Development & Engagement) Masterton was crowned Salesperson of the Year. "But nothing compares to the sense of satisfaction in building a good team around you," she stated. "The future is exciting for the channel and we're building a team and programme to meet that future head on."

Enabling channel partners to fulfil their potential is an ambition fervently pursued by Masterton. She noted

that the UK channel is undergoing a period of 'incredible change' and that partners are becoming much broader in their scope of operation. "You have Microsoft partners, traditional telco and other providers getting involved in the UCaaS and CCaaS space," she stated. "Traditional partners are not only seeing the shift from legacy to cloud, some are also having to reskill as they move into a managed service offering, particularly as they work out what AI can do for their customers."

Portfolio development and digital transformation is key to the future success of partners, observed Masterton, especially as a growing number of organisations are considering how AI can be integrated into their workflows and products. At the same time, many more organisations are coming to an understanding of how contact centre solutions can boost their operations. "We talk to companies every day who tell us 'we don't have a contact centre' because they don't realise the different

ways of working that modern contact centre options can bring to both their front and back office functions," explained Masterton. "What they soon realise is that we have democratised who can have contact centre functionality. It's not about needing 10,000 staff or a massive building. Even the smallest company can act and behave like a contact

centre and have all the same access to data, analytics and tools as larger organisations."

Marketing as a Service
8x8 is also extending the concept of as-a-service beyond traditional approaches to SaaS. "Our prime offering to partners is a Marketing as a Service (MaaS) function which helps resellers navigate the multiple

marketing tools and materials available from 8x8," she said. "The MaaS programme aligns partners with a marketing agent who can help steer their marketing plan, show them how to get the most out of data enrichment and which applicable campaigns are available."

This interconnected and multifaceted approach to

the future

marketing is essential given that modern day solutions are based on a lot more than the communications platform. Resellers can also handle security, connectivity, data and any potential Microsoft environment, pointed out Masterton. "There's a lot there for resellers to go for if they are willing to grasp the opportunities," she added. "Resellers can offer

Even the smallest company can act like a contact centre and have the same access to data, analytics and tools as larger organisations

wrap around services and be a full managed services provider. There will always be new areas to explore in the marketplace."

Harnessing intelligence
In this context, Masterton noted that 8x8 is especially focused on 'AI with a purpose', encompassing solutions such as 8x8 Intelligent Customer Assistant Voice which enables streamlined workflows, minimises manual data collection and eliminates blind transfers to deliver personalised experiences.

"We're also putting time and effort into our Technology Partner Ecosystems (TPEs)," added Masterton. "No single company can do it alone. For example, mid-market businesses have the same needs as the largest enterprises but lack those budgets and resources,

so we created a different kind of TPE which brings together a curated network of ISVs, VARs and SIs to help joint customers solve specific CX use cases."

Adaptability
Such endeavours illustrate the need for the channel to adapt to the changing requirements of the market. "Today's customers want to interact with organisations in a way that gives them speedy and effective resolutions to their issues, so it is key to focus on how this can be achieved," added Masterton. "Understanding customer needs and challenges and taking the time to address their specific pain points to enhance the customer experience are key to building long-term relationships and ensuring that you're staying innovative and ahead of the game."

Masterton is just as motivated to see more women in senior roles within the comms channel, and her inspirational career journey and achievements make her an outstanding role model. "In terms of balance, things are better than they were," she added. "But highlighting internal promotions and opportunities for women would help to improve the ratio, which is something I have been lucky with. Many people put in hard work while keeping their heads down which can lead to excellent potential being overlooked just because they are so focused on their day-to-day." ∎

Neurodiversity wins new sales

People buy from people and it's likely that a significant portion of them are neurodivergent, writes Support to Win CEO Julie Mills.

Up to 10 per cent of the customers you currently work for and 10 per cent of the prospects you target are likely to be neurodivergent. This conservative estimate raises a number of important questions: Do you understand and communicate with them the right way? Do your staff even know how to? What internal policies or strategic plans do you have for ensuring you are as inclusive about neurodiversity as you are with race, religion, gender and sexuality?

Julie Mills

Customer success
We all want equality, but ND-inclusion has more than just a moral dimension. Through their ND people businesses also become more competitive, build stronger teams and gain more success with customers. And I can tell you for sure that ND customers are happier working with ND-friendly organisations. Why wouldn't they be? It puts them more at ease for a better customer experience, developing more trust and closer working relationships that ultimately result in higher spend.

Start with employees
Being an ND-friendly business for customers starts with being an ND-inclusive workplace for employees. Let's say 10 per cent of your own customer-facing staff are neurodivergent – could you create a better environment

that realises their maximum potential? Shifting towards an ND-inclusive stance breaks down barriers between staff and customers, making more of your people into true advocates for your brand. This is about more than the practicalities of 'people working with people' happily and effectively, it's also about your reputation in the market and recognition for being a good corporate citizen that plays fair and embraces all.

Procurement rules
While being an ND-friendly business can make you more successful with customers, how can you generate more opportunities to win bigger and better deals too? Many public bodies (and big corporates) already have clauses in their procurement rules requiring vendors to demonstrate their

commitment to diversity and equality. These will start to specifically reference neurodiversity in the near future, barring non-complaint parties from tendering.

Although unlikely to be onerous to start with – for example, a written ND policy or details of awareness and inclusion initiatives – they could ratchet up over time. This should focus minds, benefit the more ND aware, and create problems for those who haven't planned ahead.

The reasons are adding up for business leaders to engage more with neurodiversity in 2024, and we are now supporting other businesses in the comms industry through structured training, consultancy and other targeted solutions. What are you waiting for? ∎

Setting a strategic cours

Taking responsibility for the future of your business and investing strategic time and effort into the priorities that matter most – such as differentiation, competitiveness, single-source supplier status and knowledge building – will be key to long-term success, according to panelists at last month's Comms Dealer Channel Forecast insight session.

The factors and strategies that drive differentiation and competitiveness are becoming top of mind for a growing number of resellers, according to Jamie Hughes, Sales Director, Evolve IP. "Competition in the UK market is a lot more established with fewer newcomers, so differentiation among resellers is challenging," he stated. "Therefore we are seeing resellers follow a dual vendor strategy, not just from a voice perspective but also connectivity and cyber solutions. Resellers are wanting to move away from market commoditisation while maintaining margins, increasing ARPU and putting more value into what they are selling, while pursuing alternative solutions and upsell opportunities."

The comms channel is undergoing an unprecedented level of disruption, driven by digitalisation and to a large degree led by industry giants with influence, presenting resellers with another challenge in terms of achieving an advantage. "There's a big evolution in the market around Microsoft and Teams," stated Ian Dunstan, Managing Director, Cobalt. "Microsoft is a big competitor selling direct, but luckily it is still not likely to get it right for the next year or so. You can't fight Microsoft but working in synergy with it could give you a competitive advantage as a single solution provider. All small and medium sized businesses would rather have one person to talk to and a trusted partnership rather than a supplier relationship. That's the key difference."

Added to this mix, observed Paul Gibbs, Head of Sales, VoIP Unlimited, is the challenge of securing revenue from each customer while ring-fencing client bases for the longer-term. "Some are doing the 'did you know?' exercise," he stated. "Did you know we did this and that service? There's nothing more infuriating to a reseller than a customer sourcing a product or service from someone else because they didn't know their ICT provider could deliver. Engaging with all customers more closely so they know everything you do and driving that relationship is key."

Know your customer

Hughes underlined the well used phrase that it's more difficult to acquire new customers than drive revenue from existing ones. "It's about understanding your customers, their processes, the tools they use and how they can be more efficient, rather than just selling to

Jamie Hughes

Resellers should not be afraid to speak to their vendors to find out what they have planned for 2024, assess what they are seeing in the market and the solutions they are coming up with

clients and revisiting them in around 30 months or six months before the contract renewal," he added. "Are customers taking all of the solutions you provide? Is your customer part of a larger group? Are they a franchise? Do they offer international opportunities? These questions help to understand the customer better."

Those fast growing resellers and MSPs supported by investment are enabling their business transformation through acquisitions, which gives them an advantage as a single source supplier. "We've seen so much acquisition in the market," noted Gibbs. "We now have super-resellers providing a multitude of services.

Smaller resellers understand that they need to maximise wallet share and shut the door, and are looking for vendors to create long lasting partnerships that enable them to provide all the services a customer needs."

Selective partnering

Therefore a product and service portfolio assessment is crucial for resellers wanting to keep pace with their faster growing counterparts, but despite the need for a broader scope of products, Hughes advises that it's not about having a greater number of partnerships, it's about being smart and selective. "I would love every one of our partners to just sell our services, but in a competitive world that is not realistic," he added. "If you have three or four vendors you are diluting the value of those vendors – but a dual vendor strategy supports the plugging of portfolio gaps."

Navigating today's challenges successfully will also enable resellers to better understand their own businesses, believes Dunstan, who says they should stick to what they know best despite taking a longer and wider strategic view. "Do what you're good at and become what you are," he advised. "Today, we see top comms people trying to lead as an IT business. But they are good telecoms

se for 2024 and beyond

Ian Dunstan

I want my team to have the same undiluted message around what we do, how we do it and how we conduct ourselves. We talk about our values the whole time

companies, not IT businesses. If you're really good at what you do, stick to that. If you want to evolve into a different marketplace, acquire a business or bring people on board with the skills. Doing it properly requires that focus."

Trusted provider
Dunstan's approach has proved to be successful for Cobalt. "We're a trusted provider and a one-stop-shop

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More points to consider...

WE ARE a carbon neutral business. We didn't set a deadline of 2030, we just did it, like everything else we do.
Ian Dunstan, Managing Director, Cobalt

CLOUD has been the way of the world for a few years now. Having everything on an opex basis is good for the end user.
Paul Gibbs, Head of Sales, VoIP Unlimited

BE MINDFUL of the younger generations as they want to work for a company that has ESG priorities in place. We have now appointed a sustainability manager.
Jamie Hughes, Sales Director, Evolve IP

which takes the customer out of the marketplace," he added. "This keeps the pressure on us as a supplier as we have to do as well as we can. I'm also king of the 30 day contract – this also keeps us on our toes and agile. We've grown, moved offices, expanded the sales team and are on a push towards the end of a ten year plan. And I've established eight core values using simple words and an explanation to support our culture. I want my team to have the same undiluted message around what we do, how we do it and how we conduct ourselves. We talk about our values the whole time."

Purposeful strategies
Values and behaviours may also be determined by the markets resellers and MSPs operate in, observed Gibbs. "It's important to develop more purposeful strategies, especially when tendering for certain projects that require commitments to ESG," he commented. "If you don't answer to public sector bids, it's on you to decide what your values are and how you want your people to behave. It's important for reseller owners to have that at the forefront of their mind, but having an ESG policy doesn't keep the lights on every day. It's about getting the balance right and the markets you play in."

Having a clearly defined purpose and set of values inevitably builds trust with staff and customers, and shows that a business cares and contributes to society – all factors that are rising up the leadership agenda, along with business outcome improvements based on insights and operational excellence. "We realigned our core values last year and focused on knowledge building through initiatives like lunch-and-learns and levelling up across the organisation," explained Hughes. "We are building on our progress this year while leveraging our vendors to learn more about their solutions and what they know about their competition. We're also looking to be more

data driven and better able to inform partners about what their customers are doing and the solutions that could support them.

"Refining customer and partner experiences is also on our agenda, along with discussions with partners around APIs and streamlining the provisioning process. So for this year, the big themes are more knowledge and leveraging data. Resellers should not be afraid to speak to their vendors and find out what they have planned for 2024, assess what they are seeing in the market and the solutions they are coming up with. We have three launches this quarter – one around compliance and two around the customer experience. See what your vendors are doing."

Perhaps there has never been a more important time for resellers to build greater trust with their vendors and customers to solve problems and challenges, especially in the context of widespread industry transformation, including the PSTN shut down. "We are staring down the barrel of the 2025 switch off," noted Gibbs. "It's getting real, it's going to happen, and resellers need to help smaller businesses move to IP technologies."

Dunstan added: "Resellers have two years until the big switch off, so focus on your base and get everyone on legacy comms onto new technology. We have no ISDN lines – they've all been moved – and I'm talking to everyone else's customers who haven't done that already." ∎

Paul Gibbs

We're staring down the barrel of the 2025 switch off. It's getting real and resellers need to help smaller businesses move to IP technologies

Embracing CCaaS as a co[

Getting your partner strategy right in the CCaaS space will unlock a market opportunity that is ever-stimulated by innovation and growth potential, according to Content Guru co-founder and CEO Martin Taylor.

Martin Taylor

E mbracing CCaaS as a core specialism will pay big dividends for ICT resellers so long as they form the right strategic alliances and have an appetite to identify and act on contact centre opportunities. And those who grasp this nettle will find a key differentiator in a comms market that is increasingly showing signs of commoditisation. Yet in a survey of reseller channel business leaders undertaken by Comms Dealer, just 2.5 per cent defined their main occupation as a contact centre provider.

"Contact centre providers represent a specialised, high value niche in the much larger reselling space, so to see that only 2.5 per cent of MSP business leaders define contact centre as their main occupation is unsurprising," stated Taylor. "Most see other aspects of managed IT services, such as UC or cloud enterprise software, as better aligned with their core business focus, and perhaps easier product segments to address."

Taylor reiterated that embracing CCaaS as a core specialism is a sound strategic move for resellers and MSPs looking to differentiate in a crowded me-too marketplace. "However, selling contact centre solutions into the sticky, high value accounts to which MSPs aspire requires specialised knowledge and training, as well as the ongoing support of a CCaaS vendor or set of vendors," he added.

Taylor also noted that most resellers have not kept pace with the rapidly evolving CCaaS market, with many trying to sell outdated, inefficient solutions against the shiny new offerings from leading CCaaS vendors. "That said, these vendors are technology businesses rather than marketing or relationship specialists, meaning that they are all amenable to working with partners, so by implication their door is open," he added. "They prefer to concentrate on new product development and cloud operations and leave others to do the job of selling."

While CCaaS vendors currently transact a considerable amount of

Most CCaaS vendors are more than willing to share knowledge with partners and, crucially in the early stages of a relationship, do most of the work in evaluating potential customers

their business directly, in most cases their plan for scaling is predicated on leveraging the channel. Therefore, while the contact centre space is currently underserved by resellers and MSPs, the opportunities are there and growing for channel partners willing to take the plunge and become CCaaS subject matter experts, pointed out Taylor.

While validating new market opportunities around CCaaS may be a challenge for resource strapped channel companies, Taylor says the challenge is far from insurmountable. "Most CCaaS vendors are more than willing to share their knowledge with partners and, crucially in the early stages of a relationship, to do most of the work in evaluating potential customers, and scoping and bidding on CCaaS solutions," he explained. "CCaaS vendors have amassed decades of specialised knowledge about the needs of customers, and how to successfully transition

from legacy on-premise contact centres to cloud solutions. All they ask is that the reseller or MSP points them in the direction of possible opportunities.

"Over time, as deals are won and field experience is gained, the reseller will become steadily more adept and autonomous. But CCaaS resellers will need to continue working closely with their vendor on an ongoing basis in order to stay abreast of evolving technology offerings and

re specialism

keep pace with customers' increasing demands."

Furthermore, noted Taylor, CCaaS does not exist in a bubble and the reseller can add value beyond the vendor's solution by providing adjacent services, such as workforce optimisation or analytics, and through integrating the customer's new front office communications system with their back office UC, CRM and other IT infrastructure. "Being a trusted partner makes the best resellers and MSPs the first port of call when expansion or change are in the offing," he added.

Customer experience

This all feeds into the customer experience which is increasingly pivotal to end user businesses seeking to meet escalating consumer demands for personalised interactions across multiple channels of engagement. "In turn, this fuels demand for scalable, reliable CCaaS solutions that work in harmony with existing corporate IT infrastructure," commented Taylor.

He says the biggest growth area in the contact centre space for the next few years will be in applying AI to customer contact handling. "Leveraging AI and intelligent automation technologies correctly will deliver the nirvana of more efficient contact handling – potentially 30-35 per cent more efficient than non-AI-enabled contact centres – at the same time as

providing a better customer experience, with shorter handling times and secure hyper-personalisation," added Taylor.

Inspiring R&D

He noted that Content Guru aims for 80 per cent of its product development to be 'customer inspired', with the remaining 20 per cent flowing from its R&D programme which works up to four years ahead of what the company brings to market. "We hold regular product and customer advisory groups to inform our development roadmap," said Taylor. "Most of the trends we see in the wider market, such as integrated workforce management and customer data platforms within CCaaS, were being discussed by customers months, or usually years before solutions became mainstream."

Taylor emphasised the point that the cloud delivery model itself was first suggested to Content Guru by customers three full years before Gartner even coined the term 'cloud', enabling the company to start work on the necessary and complex multi-tenanting architecture well ahead of it being needed in the market. "Fostering meaningful relationships with customers, often through partners, allows us to stay attentive to upcoming trends and guide product development," added Taylor.

It is clear to all that AI development is set to change

the future of CCaaS, enabling a wider range of enquiry types to be handled in the contact centre, and allowing customers to receive the empathy of a human-facing interaction alongside the speed and productivity gains afforded by AI before, during and after every interaction.

"AI-driven analytics will also provide more in-depth insights, including automated customer satisfaction (CSAT) scoring, quality auditing and resource forecasting," observed Taylor. "For those interactions that don't require a human, AI-driven automation allows for more intelligent self-service options which free up human agents for more complex inquiries."

Despite this clear vision for AI in the contact centre space, predicting the future of CCaaS is becoming harder than ever, believes Taylor. "The emergence of disruptive technologies, such as ChatGPT, brings enormous implications as to how customer contact is going to be delivered in the years ahead," he stated. "We see the contact centre space as 'ground zero' for the implementation of AI in mainstream business. The arrival of such an exciting inflection point creates opportunities for end user businesses to build competitive advantage through operational efficiency and better service, at the same time dooming to failure those organisations that fail to invest in CCaaS and intelligent automation.

"All of this makes 2024 a prime time for resellers and MSPs to build on their status as trusted advisors and guide their customers towards AI-enabled CCaaS." ∎

Taylor's top tip...

ENHANCING the customer experience in the ways that are most relevant to clients should be at the heart of everything you do. Every solution should aim to improve customer satisfaction, address specific customer needs and offer hyper-personalised and super-efficient interactions across every contact channel.

Lessons learned on the eff

This month we shed light on the experiences of successful business leaders in the channel and glean insights into the lessons learned along their career pathways, lessons that could also help you successfully lead through the current industry transformation.

CARL BARNETT
CEO
GLOBAL 4
COMMUNICATIONS

One of the fastest and most important lessons I have learned as a leader is to build a robust team. As a leader, you cannot single-handedly accomplish all the tasks and navigate all the complex challenges thrown at you. Building a solid team is not just about assembling individuals, it's about creating a cohesive team unit who have a diverse set of skills, perspectives and personalities. The ability to delegate responsibilities, empower team members and drive collaboration directly impacts the overall success of the organisation. The lesson learned is that true leadership is a collective effort, and a leader's success is fundamentally and intrinsically tied to the strength and cohesion of the team they create and cultivate.

PAM BLANCHARD
MD
ICA

In my 27-year journey from an engineer to a director in our industry, I've navigated a path less travelled by many women. From the outset, I learned that my team is my greatest asset in an industry where innovation and effective problem solving are paramount. Embracing continuous learning and development within the team has been essential to stay relevant and competitive. As a mentor, I've realised that true leadership is about inspiring and empowering your team, leading by example and fostering a culture of mutual respect and innovation. A key revelation was the importance of flexibility in business planning. The ability to adapt and evolve as circumstances change is crucial, striking a balance between a clear direction and openness to new, sometimes unanticipated, opportunities. Learning from mistakes and viewing them as lessons rather than failures has enabled me to take calculated risks, innovate and trust my judgment.

FRASER FERGUSON
FOUNDER AND
DIRECTOR
KUBENET

I have been involved in building three businesses, one that exited to a FTSE 250, KubeNet, and one that failed. What's important is that you take lessons learned into your working life. Firstly, building a strong leadership team is crucial to growth and success. Work with talent that aligns with the aims of the business and let them make meaningful decisions. Ensure your talent has the tools and energy to deliver, and provide a career path that will excite them. Relationships matter so look after your network and take clients and suppliers with you on the journey. I have a number that I call on for advice both personally and business, it grows loyalty and they become great advocates. Regarding the business that failed - you can run low on cash, but don't run out of cash.

BARNEY TAYLOR
CEO
FOCUS GROUP

I began my career in telesales at 18 years old and I still use the skills I learnt in those early days. It was tough but it has been the foundation of my entire career. As a leader, the most important lesson I've learned is to always put people first. To be a good leader does not mean you cannot be approachable, patient, constructive and communicate well. I try to surround myself with personalities that reflect this style of leadership. Lastly, as a CEO who must be completely accountable to investors, owners and a board, full transparency is crucial. Whatever bad news you must give, be up-front and give it early. Take the hit and learn to communicate how you will fix it at the same time. No bad news ever gets better for waiting.

IAN DUNSTAN
MD
COBALT

I rely on wise words that have been handed down through the Dunstan family. My great grandfather, Stanley, was a butcher and his wise words were – 'Make your last loss your first loss'. If it's going to end up costing you financially or emotionally at the end of the journey, make the journey as short as possible. Grandad Alec's lesson was – 'Accept the things you can't change'. Finally, my dad Charles' lesson was – 'Who cares what other people think if you have a high opinion of yourself?' This isn't arrogance, it's understanding what your value is. I have never suffered from imposter syndrome because I know someone has put me there, and they may have a reason I don't yet know. Also, stubbornness can be a huge strength but an even bigger weakness.

ective leadership journey

Be authentic and have integrity. By being yourself, you build trust and attract honest people who live and work by your values, resulting in long and transparent relationships. Don't accept no for an answer if you want something done. Even if people make mistakes and get it wrong at least they have tried and done their best. Sometimes you win and sometimes you lose, but if we don't fail then we don't learn and grow with it. Work hard, there are no shortcuts in life. If you want results, then you must work relentlessly for them. Nothing comes easy and hard work is the payoff. When you instil a good work ethic in your team and reward their hard work it will pay off both intrinsically and extrinsicall.

MATT DYKES
COO AND CO-OWNER
ABZORB

I've never seen an underperforming sales team in a business with a brilliant product and great customer service. Marketing and sales talent is important, but you must get the value proposition right first. Lots of people focus on KPIs and that's all good. However, when they show something is wrong make sure you look all the way upstream for the source of the problem. More activity alone won't fix the issue. If in doubt, overshare. Communication is important and it must be authentic. Trust that most people want to do the right thing, you never know who will be able to help you, or who you'll be able to help.

PETE TOMLINSON
CEO
WINDSOR TELECOM

For me it's about throwing yourself in at the deep end, getting on with it and finding a way forward even if you are in a difficult position and don't always have all the immediate answers. Feel confident, believe in your ability and you will rise to the top. That's the key. Technology never stands still but the key to success is having the right people around you to deliver your objectives, mindset and vision. I've been lucky to have the skilled teams to drive business growth. I don't tend to look back but always forward with vigour, enthusiasm and belief.

PAUL HARRISON
MD EMEA
EVOLVE IP

Surround yourself with people better than you. Effective leaders have the humility to recognise that they are not always right, nor are they the best at everything. Business is a team sport and surrounding yourself with people better than you makes the journey an easier and more enjoyable one. Your true worth is determined by how much more you bring in value than you take in payment. In any successful relationship, with a colleague or customer, you need to bring more to the table. Be patient and play the long game. Effective leaders see business as an infinite game. Short-term thinking yields short-term results which are typically not sustainable. The most effective decision making will be based on what is right over the long-term.

ADAM TURTON
CEO
ELITE GROUP

Leaders should inspire their teams to achieve more, not instil the fear of failure. Otherwise, they risk employees worrying more about keeping their jobs than developing themselves. They should be active too, keeping tabs on service tickets, for example. Most partners and customers have had some sort of reply from me on a ticket without realising it because, from a service point of view, I'm one of the team. It allows me to have granular visibility and lead by example, educating the team on how to respond to certain situations. Finally, leaders are never too experienced to learn. Over the last 18 months we've had a chairman who I've learnt a great deal from. My management style may still be evolving, but the important thing for me is that I don't change as a person.

MIKE VAN BUNNENS
CEO
COMMS365

Regardless of their professional level, working toward motivating employees with a clear understanding of how to maximise productivity and skills is key to a company's growth strategy. Highly engaged employees are willing to go the extra mile to contribute to success. Standing still after a great quarter feels like the most comfortable step, but to be disruptive in business we must keep moving. Being active with sales and evolving company strategy following the market has given me the knowledge needed to lead toward the most advantageous future. Great internal comms drives a business forward. When employees know what they are working towards they can add value to the total experience and develop company-wide consistency that moves the needle forward.

JOHN HAYES-WARREN
CEO
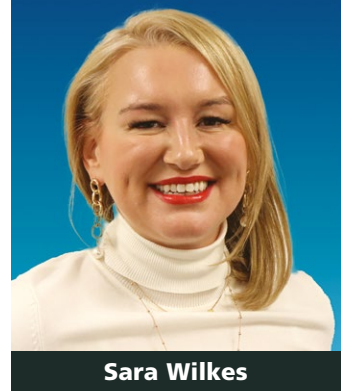**AGILITAS**
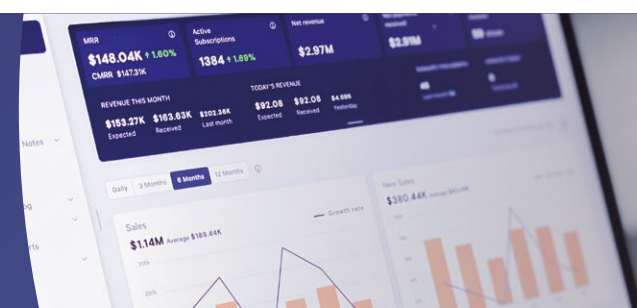
Stevens in CEO role

Howard Stevens

CPAAS vendor TelcoSwitch has appointed Howard Stevens as CEO, taking over from Matt Mansell who oversaw the launch of the CallSwitch One platform following the acquisition of TelcoSwitch by investor Queen's Park Equity. Mansell retains a position on the TelcoSwitch Board of Directors. Stevens brings over 20 years executive experience in multi-national high growth environments and spent eight years as SVP & Global Head of Sales at SAP where he was credited with developing telecoms into one of the company's top three fastest growing markets. Stevens was most recently CEO for Vista Private Equity backed Tomia, a provider of roaming and inter-operator connectivity solutions for global carriers, and guided the business towards its acquisition by Lumine Group in 2022. TelcoSwitch Chairman Ivan Martin stated: "In welcoming Howard as our Chief Executive Officer and retaining Matt on our Board of Directors, the team is further strengthened for this next phase of our business growth."

Also on the move...

Andrew Foster

ANDREW Foster has joined tech solution provider North as Managing Director for Public Services. He was previously Regional Managing Director for Capita's Local Public Services business. Prior to that he spent two decades working in local government focusing on combating community criminal activities. He later became COO at the Chartered Trading Standard Institute. "The public sector is under pressure to reduce costs while maintaining the provision of services as well as finding ways to benefit from the deployment of new technologies," stated Foster. "The public sector needs partners to help navigate these challenges."

ABZORB has recruited Neil Gobsill as Head of Networking. His initial remit is to set up the company's networking division in-house and launch

Neil Gobsill

specific networking solutions and the associated support. In particular, Gobsill will identify and meet the networking requirements of public sector customers with multi-site networks. "I will help customers to improve their network architecture with a more cost-effective and easier to manage Internet-first strategy, while increasing the security of their networks against cyber threats," stated Gobsill.

Guerion to lead Cellhire

Tony Guerion

LDC-backed Cellhire has instated Tony Guerion as CEO. He brings over 27 years business leadership and management experience in the comms sector, including a notable stint at Vodafone which he joined in 2010 and became Global Head of Sales for IoT in 2016. Guerion also held the post of CEO of Vodafone France since 2019.

Cellhire's Chairman and founder Tim Williams stated: "Tony's more than 20 years experience in IoT will build on LDC's investment and help us grow in Europe, North America and Asia."

Cellhire has expanded its IoT connectivity solutions following a new Framework Agreement with Orange France. Through this agreement, Cellhire is enhancing its IoT proposition with roaming offerings in more than 220 global destinations with 700-plus network operators.

Guerion added: "The significance of IoT in 2024 is greater than ever before. It plays a crucial role in improving productivity, streamlining operations and revolutionising various industries. However, their effectiveness is entirely dependent on consistent connectivity."

Agilitas gets CX specialist

Sara Wilkes

FORMER SCC Director of Customer Experience Sara Wilkes has joined Agilitas as Chief Operating Officer. Her 15 years tech channel experience also includes a near eight year stint at Computacenter where she became International Project Manager before joining SCC in 2014 as Transition Manager. As well as working her way up the ranks at SCC she created and chaired its Diversity and Inclusion Council. Wilkes' new remit is to strengthen Agilitas' customer experience strategy and culture. "I have worked closely with the Agilitas team for several years and I'm looking forward to becoming part of the company's transformation journey," she stated. Agilitas CEO John Hayes-Warren added: "Sara brings new energy to Agilitas, and has the confidence to implement a new vision for the customer experience side of our business."

Flotek appoints new sales chief

Stuart Meikle

FLOTEK has kicked off a run of senior management placements with the appointment of Stuart Meikle to the newly created position of Head of Sales. He brings over a decade of industry experience having held roles at Datakom, Carphone Warehouse and Premitel. He most recently worked in the medical sector in roles such as Sales Director, Head of Supplier Development and Commercial Director. Meikle is heading up a 12-strong sales team that will likely expand to 20-plus in 2024 in a bid to win larger corporate clients. CEO Jay Ball said: "With plans to grow the sales team and drive organic expansion this year, Stuart will utilise his industry expertise to help drive Flotek by attracting new clients and new team members."

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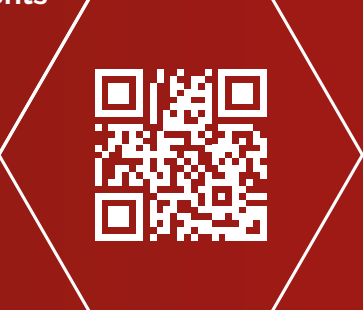
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