



Incoming Cellhire CEO sets out bold strategy p28

IP Telecom chief aims to take top spot in Ireland p32



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THE HEARTBEAT OF THE UK ICT INDUSTRY



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This month's movers and shakers



Industry united for shared goal

THE Big Goal regional football tournaments to be staged this month at top class football venues across the north, south and midlands represent the biggest unifying CSR initiative the channel has ever seen, says Giacom CEO Terry O'Brien.

SPECIAL REPORT

Entry fees for this year's tournament will fund 42 academies run by The Street Soccer Foundation which brings the power of football into communities nationwide, helping homeless and disadvantaged children and young people to turn their lives around.

"Never before has the channel come together in such a positive and unifying way to support vulnerable

young people," stated O'Brien (pictured above centre left).

He believes the most powerful aspect of the initiative is that channel firms can get directly involved in the academies they are sponsoring in their local areas.

"This inspires teams and gives companies the opportunity to potentially recruit young individuals who just need a break in life," he said.

"The academies supported by companies in our industry

already means 400 young people will get new opportunities in life by simply playing football. You can't put a price on that which is why Giacom got involved as headline sponsor."

Keith Mabbutt, CEO and founder of The Street Soccer Foundation, added: "The way this industry has united to help struggling young people has been awesome. It's The Big Goal's first year and it can only get bigger." **For more info on The Big Goal initiative see p8**

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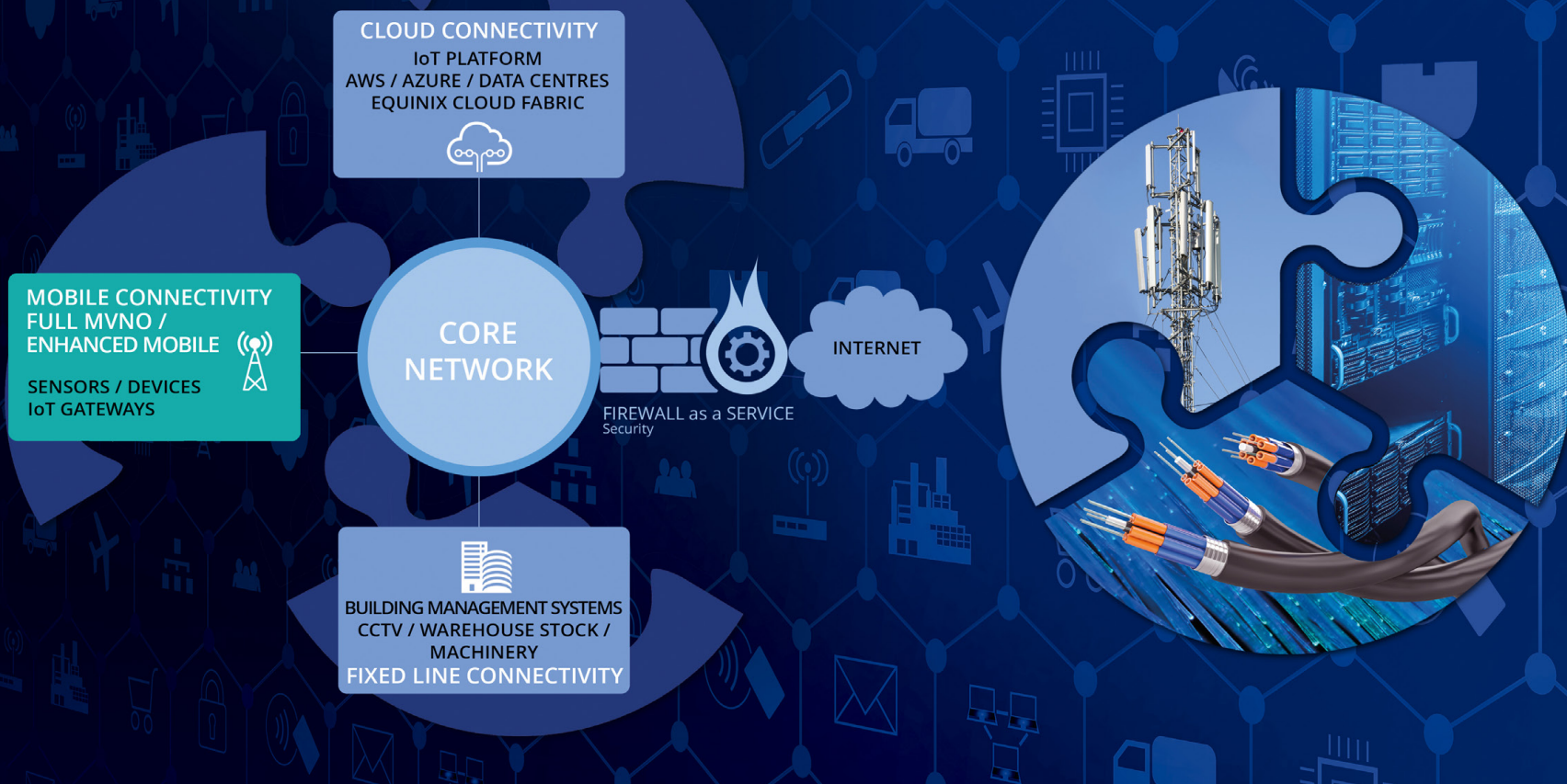
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Welcome comment



Stuart Gilroy

YES, the channel needs a spirit of practical positivism: Putting into practice what we preach is generally 'easier said than done'. But this throwaway phrase, in the context of our industry, creates a risk of market and business inertness. What we

need is a controlled and focused version of Boris Johnson's gung-ho 'get the job done' attitude. Let's call it practical positivism – the polar opposite of what we're seeing in spade-fuls today (evidenced by Comms Dealer research).

Putting yourself in the shoes of your customer and understanding what drives their business success is proving to be easier said than done for many. And maximising the opportunities available to channel partners (and upstream suppliers) including the most fundamental of comms technologies like CCaaS and UCaaS, is also proving to be easier said than done. The full potential of these core markets is likely to remain unrealised for the foreseeable future. Which is surprising. Another big one, analytics, is clearly easier said than done with many channel partners not yet selling solutions that have been available for some time, not just around CCaaS but also UCaaS and cloud in general.

Where does this leave the channel when it comes to addressing new products and services like AI, automation and 5G? They'll be more 'easier said than done' than ever. There's no shortage of vendors talking up the market, asking partners for potential use cases around technologies they don't yet understand let alone can sell, for markets they're not even in. Where will that get us? The catalysts that will drive mutual success are improved and proactive knowledge sharing and comprehensive supply chain support. The channel requires doers, not talkers. That's easier said than done – but let's just do it.

Stuart Gilroy, Editor

To keep up to date with the latest channel news, as it happens, visit www.comms-dealer.com daily

Revamp aids Elite growth



Adam Turton

THE restructure of Elite Group into two separate companies provides a springboard to achieve an overall objective of trebling in size and hitting £100m revenue over the next three to five years, according to CEO Adam Turton.

The restructure sees Elite maintain its focus on comms while the Netcentrix brand (acquired in 2016) has been resurrected to focus on IT managed services. The two businesses will operate under the New Technology Group brand created for acquisitions.

Turton, who is spearheading the transformation, stated: "This represents a vital step in ensuring we are organised in a way to successfully

deliver on our customer experience ambitions.

"This change is also based on direct feedback from our customers on their distinctly different needs between communications and IT services.

"Organising our company in this way provides greater focus on service delivery, enabling us to bring more combined value, technology and innovation to Elite Group and Netcentrix customers.

"These changes also enable us to diversify our technology revenues, target more markets with more technology with greater capability, meaning we can accelerate growth and reinvestment into the business." See page 24

Editor's picks

AVOIRA MD Andrew Roberts has bought the business from parent company Nycomm which acquired Avoira in 2017. Roberts reinvested funds from the sale of his Nycomm shareholding in Bury-headquartered Avoira and will remain at the helm of the business he has led since 2003. Avoira now generates over £26.5m revenue and employs circa 160 staff at its offices in Bury, Bristol, Leeds, London, West Lakes and Warrington. Roberts joined Avoira (then known as Pennine Telecom) in 1978 as an apprentice radio service technician. At the time the business was a two-way radio specialist and expanded into the telecoms sector following liberalisation of the market. Roberts led a MBO in 2003.

TALKTALK Wholesale Services has rebranded as PlatformX Communications (PXC) in a move that CEO Tom O'Hagan says underscores the company's challenger status in the wholesale connectivity market. "Competition and innovation are essential to market growth and doing things differently requires players like us with an appetite for developing new approaches," he commented.

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

Our next Channel Forecast session: Connectivity & IoT

In our next Comms Dealer Channel Forecast session we explore why it's time to move the dial on high value connectivity potential and assess how far network intelligence and the IoT is coming of age.

The session will be recorded in April 2024 with our panel of industry experts discussing the subject with our editorial team. The session will be featured in the May issue of Comms Dealer, with a series of 'video shorts' addressing the essential questions shared on social media.

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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Editor's picks

CITYFIBRE'S roll out has been boosted by up to 300,000 premises through the acquisition of fibre network operator Lit Fibre from Newlight Partners. The deal is the first of several transactions CityFibre expects to close over the next two years. CEO Greg Mesch stated: "The UK market needs a third infrastructure platform of scale to ensure competition matures. Our acquisition of Lit is a demonstration of our intent to establish CityFibre as the core of that third platform."

DUBLIN-based UC provider IP Telecom's acquisition of Centrecom Systems follows a six million euro investment from Development Capital and signals the next step in its growth campaign. "Our growth in revenue has increased by double digits year-on-year and the acquisition of Centrecom, a B2B service provider in managed connectivity and existing partner, marks a significant milestone," stated IP Telecom CEO Shena Brien. See page 32

IT MANAGED service provider Equity Networks is set to execute on a pipeline of acquisition targets following an investment boost from Coniston Capital. Former Alternative Networks CEO and ex-Wavenet Chairman Edward Spurrier joins Equity Networks as Non-Executive Chairman. Equity Networks was founded in 2011 and is led by Co-Managing Directors Alex Hall and Marcos Reid. The company has completed five transactions to date.

REDSQUID'S managed services capabilities have been boosted through the acquisition of High Wycombe-based MSP Epoq IT, its third transaction in seven months. The deal was funded by a larger facility from fellow B Corp Triple Point which remains a dedicated funding line for future acquisitions. Redsquid founders CEO Sohin Raithatha and COO Vince Mignacca remain the only shareholders of the Hertfordshire headquartered business.

LINCS-based managed IT support provider SCS Technology Solutions has been acquired by Air IT. The deal brings the number of Air IT's offices across the country to 11. Air IT CEO James Steventon stated: "With a strong focus on our core services including managed IT support and Microsoft technologies, we're combining our joint knowledge, skills and experience to deliver greater results."

Focus makes key purchase



Brian Lodge

FOCUS Group's regional reach has extended into Cornwall with the acquisition of Truro headquartered Datasharp.

The deal bolsters Focus' overall south west presence with staff already based in Exeter and Bristol.

Datasharp was established in 1984 and brings an opportunity for Focus to cross-sell its full suite of services including mobile and cybersecurity.

Focus Group Regional Director Brian Lodge commented: "Datasharp's longstanding presence in the industry and customer base makes it an invaluable addition to our group. This acquisition presents opportunities for us to leverage our combined expertise and expand our service offerings, particularly in the south west."

Datasharp MD Jane Cockcroft added: "This partnership brings together Datasharp's expertise and team with Focus Group's resources, size, brand and energy."

More M&A

BLUECUBE Cloud Services' evolution from a comms firm to a fully fledged MSP took another step forward last month with the acquisition of Techbox Managed IT Services. Bluecube was founded 15 years ago as a provider of business mobile phone services alongside broadband and telephony, later moving into hosted telephony, UC and Internet connectivity services. "Last year we entered the IT sector and the acquisition of Techbox adds momentum to our growth strategy," said MD Paul Reames. Techbox was established in 2018 by Andy Fellows who becomes Head of IT Services at Bluecube.

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How FTTP is shaping up

Following the publication of Megabuyte's latest full fibre quarterly update Chief Analyst Philip Carse reads between the FTTP lines with astute financial and strategic analysis of telco majors Openreach, VMO2 and altnet CityFibre.

Against the backdrop of increasing broadband losses, with Openreach in particular highlighting softness in this regard while VMO2 saw some growth (albeit just 10k net adds), both incumbents ramped up their FTTP annualised build rates to 3.8m (+400k) for Openreach and 1.2m (+200k) for VMO2 (on behalf of nexfibre). Meanwhile, CityFibre continued to report increasing uptake with circa 60k net adds in its December quarter, on a softer build rate going forward with the delta to be plugged with M&A – as highlighted by its recent acquisition of Lit Fibre. The biggest change to the status quo came from VMO2 with the announcement of its at-scale wholesale offering NetCo which will encapsulate VMO2's circa 17m premises in a wholesale infrastructure challenger network to Openreach.

Openreach's December 2023 quarter KPIs

In the December 2023 quarter (Q3 FY24), Openreach added 950k premises to its UK FTTP footprint (just shy of its 1m

per quarter target) versus the 860k added in the quarter to September, taking the total to just under 13m premises, over half of its initial 25m target, and almost as much as all the altnets combined.

Openreach also added 423k FTTP customers (mostly upgrades from FTTC-base broadband) via its consumer and enterprise retail arms as well as third party ISPs such as Vodafone, Sky and Talktalk, taking the total FTTP connections to 4.3m. This total is an order of magnitude (2-3x) higher than the combined altnet connections, reflecting the easier job of upgrading existing customers to FTTP versus having to attract new customers.

Penetration is still rising on the back of an increased build, with this being the main feature of Openreach's performance of the last year. Penetration of FTTP premises has risen to 33.6%, up from 28.5% the previous year. Interestingly, however, expected Openreach net broadband losses are on track to be higher than the previously flagged 400k for the full year, with calendar



Philip Carse

The biggest change to the status quo came from VMO2 with the announcement of its wholesale offering NetCo

2023 showing 437k net losses and the nine months to December 2023 at 370k losses – reflective of a weakening consumer landscape and likely increased competition from altnets now more focused on gaining customers than building networks as constraints on funding continues.

Openreach's longer-term targets

In its full year 2023 results release, Openreach reaffirmed its target of 25m FTTP premises by the end 2026. This requires a quarterly build of 1m premises (versus last quarter's 950k and an average of 808k in the last four reported quarters). Openreach is coming in under its capex guidance of £250-£350 per premise

by virtue of improving FTTP build unit costs, and is now expecting FY24 FCF towards the top end of previously flagged £1.0-£1.3bn guidance. Beyond 2024 Openreach continues to expect consistent growth in revenue and EBITDA.

Fibre investment is a key element in Openreach's target of at least doubling FCF by the end of the decade (an extra £1.5bn+), reflecting revenue and EBITDA growth and a £1bn lower annual capex bill from FY28, when the bulk of the FTTP build is done. This also factors in opex savings from moving to a full fibre, all-IP network, resulting in target headcount reductions from 130k to 75-90k and lower network maintenance costs.

VMO2's December 2023 quarter KPIs

VMO2's December quarter also saw an uptick in premises passed, with 298k added in the quarter, and 832k in the year (excluding UPP premises where integration is pending), albeit the majority were built on behalf of nexfibre. This takes the total network footprint to 17m (circa 50% of UK premises), of which around 3m is FTTP (seemingly unchanged since it first disclosed this figure last summer) with upgrade costs coming in at approximately £100 per home. Meanwhile, nexfibre's total footprint now sits at circa 830k (Q3: 505k), with 'immaterial' overbuild of UK altnets according to management, on a maintained target of 5m premises by 2026 and then up to 7m thereafter.

Liberty Global's brainchild – NetCo

In an increasingly third party ISP-driven consumer broadband market, as shown by Openreach's increasingly third party heavy broadband mix (currently at 43% of connections, up from 23% two years ago), it makes sense for VMO2 to launch an at-scale wholesale network offering, although, it won't be in effect for some time. This opens up more optionality with regards to funding and participation in the altnet consolidation, with VMO2 showing an appetite last year with the acquisition of Upp.

In terms of its corporate structure, VMO2 will contract through a wholesale agreement with NetCo, connecting its entire fixed customer base, meaning that NetCo will be revenue **Continued on page 8**



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All set for The Big Goal

Forty two teams from the ICT industry will be pitting their football skills against each other in the three regional finals of The Big Goal this month. Twelve teams will then qualify for The Big Goal national finals tournament to be stage at St George's Park – the Home of England Football – later in the year. The fees paid by teams entering the tournament will be used to fund Street Soccer Foundation Academies in their area, each helping more than 400 disadvantaged young people across the UK.

"With 32 ICT companies now supporting The Big Goal excitement is growing and momentum is building," said Nigel Sergent, Editorial Director at Comms Dealer and a co-founder of The Big Goal initiative. "The support The Big Goal has received from main sponsor Giacom and the Founding Members has been magnificent. There are 1,600 holes



Sunderland AFC's magnificent Beacon of Light complex

in a regulation football net and when we kicked off The Big Goal our simple aim was to prevent 1,600 young people slipping through the net into a life of homelessness and despair. To be a quarter of the way towards that target is amazing."

The three regional finals and teams are as follows:
Southern Regionals, Brentford FC's Community Stadium, from 12.30pm, April 12th: CityFibre, Comms

Dealer, Dataquest Group, Excalibur Communications, Focus Group 2, Gamma 2, Giacom 4, Giacom 5, Global 4 Communications, Intec 2, NPS, Ocean Telecom, Platform X Communications 2, Redsquid, Sky Business 2, Vorboss and Zenzero.

Northern Regionals, Sunderland AFC's Beacon of Light, from 9am, April 19th: ANS Group, Daisy Corporate Services 1, Daisy Corporate

Services 2, Elite Group, Firstcom Europe, Giacom 1, Giacom 2, Platform X Communications 1, Sky Business 1 and Vapour Cloud.

Midlands Regionals, Nottingham Forest's The Forest Sports Zone, from 8.30am, April 26th: BDR Group 1, BDR Group 2, Daisy Corporate Services 3, Daisy Communications, Fifteen Group, Focus Group 1, Gamma 1, Giacom 3, Inform Billing, Intec 1, Jola, Lantern Tech, NT Voice, Rydal Group, Virgin Media, Wavenet and Welcomm.

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Continued from page 6
 generating and cashflow positive from day one. It's worth noting that nexfibre (already wholesale focused) will continue to operate separately and focus on the fibre expansion on top of VMO2's existing circa 17m base, which VMO2 is in the process of upgrading from HFC to FTTP (circa 3m completed). NetCo is expected to go live in H1 2025, subject to regulatory approval.

NetCo throws a spanner in the works for wholesale focused altnets such as CityFibre, potentially giving its larger ISP partners another choice where the CityFibre network overlaps VMO2's, as well as creating some real competition in terms of a consolidation vehicle. On the customer front, this will also introduce new offerings and possibly lower prices, shifting the economics of the fibre play and putting pressure on the altnet business plans.

Wholesale challenger CityFibre
 The latest update from CityFibre highlighted that its network now encompasses 3.2 million premises RFS and is servicing 340k

subscribers (December 2023). On the commercialisation front, CityFibre added circa 60k subscribers in the December quarter, versus 10k net adds for VMO2 and 114k net losses for Openreach. In terms of build, CityFibre will slightly temper its build rate from the 1m of FY23 to 850k in FY24, with the delta to be filled by M&A – as highlighted by the Lit Fibre buy. In terms of financials,

NetCo throws a spanner in the works for wholesale focused altnets

the altnet topped £100m revenues in FY23 (calendar) and is set to be EBITDA positive in H1 2024.

In tune with its 'challenger' network branding, its 340k customers (up 165k in the year versus 115k in 2022) are serviced though 41 ISP partners selling at two to three times the rate they do over Openreach's network, helped by CityFibre's lower wholesale prices and product portfolio (symmetric speeds versus Openreach's asymmetric broadband).

Meanwhile, its latest KPIs reflect increasingly positive noises with a 10.5% (+2.3%) RFS penetration and 9.6% THP (+2.6pp). And proposition-wise, CityFibre is launching a new B2B FTTP product which will help commercialise business premises passed as part of the overall build. This would appear to be well timed given the looming (end 2025) switch off of BT's PSTN network and related

analogue services such as broadband, although CityFibre's RFS business premises sit at just circa 200k, representing

little competitive threat to incumbent Openreach.

Signs of meaningful consolidation
 During the quarter, CityFibre emerged as the buyer of altnet Lit Fibre on an all-share basis. According to Sky News, Newlight will receive 2% of the combined entity valuing the transaction at circa £80m equity. Lit Fibre brings a footprint of 200k premises RFS (built on a compatible XGS-PON framework) with planning for a further 100k to be added by

2025. Its retail ISP currently services 9k subscribers – this compares with CityFibre's 3.2m RFS network and 340k subscribers at December 2023.

Looking deeper, Lit Fibre's rumoured £80m valuation equates to £400 per premise RFS – we suspect significantly below invested capital. If £80m/£400 per premises RFS is the true enterprise value, one suspects that Lit Fibre investor Newlight hopes to recapture some return by being part of a larger organisation (with CityFibre's rumoured £4bn valuation alluding to £1,250 per premise RFS, a significant premium on Lit Fibre), leaving CityFibre to fund the network build and customer connection cost.

More broadly, CityFibre is set to play a critical role in the consolidation as its current 3.2m footprint also leaves a large acquirable base out of the 32m serviceable premises in the UK, which is less apparent for Openreach whose current addressable base (all connectivity mediums) sits at circa 29m and VMO2's at around 17m, with the former also flagging little to no M&A appetite.
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Collaborations that boost ESG

How Ingram Micro's partner collaboration platform is driving the channel's ESG agenda...

Ingram Micro's Trust X Alliance functions as a collaboration platform for like-minded global partners and is structured around subject matter committees including the ESG Group. Penelope Johnston, UK Lead for the Trust X Alliance Partner Community, stated: "The alliance works towards growing together through a system of facilitated sessions that help members adopt practices not currently used in their organisation."

The ESG Group is leveraging this collaborative approach to help partners tackle the UN's 2015 sustainability goals. "Around two years ago we started to hear more about ESG issues, particularly from companies in the upper small and mid-market space in the channel that were asking what this meant for their businesses and how they could tackle it," added Johnston.

Over half of Ingram Micro's UK Trust X members are part of the sustainability project. Elliott Carter, Experience Director at Microsoft cloud expert Perspicuity, is the Trust X Alliance lead partner for the initiative. He said: "Most companies are coming to understand the critical role of an ESG strategy but not everyone knows how to take the first steps. We are creating an environment for the free flow of ideas and discussions where no one fears looking ignorant when asking questions."



Penelope Johnston

All members have committed to tackling four of the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals. These chosen objectives are Good Health and Well Being, Climate Action, Decent Work and Economic Growth, and Gender Equality.

Tangible results

Utilize Managing Director Guy Hocking is also Regional President (UK) and Global Council Member for the Trust X Alliance. He observed: "The alliance aims to dissect these goals into something more tangible by creating targets for businesses that don't have the resources to throw at the problem. We want to make sure that our partners have a more joined-up and holistic ESG strategy they can present throughout tendering processes and to prospective employees."

The Alliance takes on a new focus every few months, its most recent project was looking at writing ESG reports. Carl Henriksen, CEO at Sustainability Alliance member OryxAlign, commented: "The group

has helped us take a more structured approach which has been a real accelerator for many of the activities we had been previously considering."

OryxAlign has now undertaken an environmental assessment and will go ahead with the process of becoming a B-Corp organisation. "It's great to work with likeminded people towards a common goal," added Henriksen. "It's also refreshing to see that you are not swimming upstream by yourself."

The Trust X approach encourages members to feed their learnings into their own partner and supplier ecosystems. Kailas Bryant, Communications Manager at ADM Computing, added: "We are sharing the information we learn from the programme with our business network through webinars and educational sessions. Many companies we interact with have come to see us as an ESG specialist they can learn from."

Another benefit of the Alliance, noted Bryant, is that it brings together partners with multiple vendors and suppliers. "Measuring and limiting Scope 3 emissions is the hardest part of a sustainability strategy due to the lack of control we have in the process," he stated. "Having a direct channel to talk about sustainability to our suppliers further up the chain is powerful."

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Intelligent connections

Harnessing the rise of intelligent connectivity will be a key success factor in creating future differentiation in the comms channel, according to PXC Chief Product & Marketing Officer Neil Wilson.

Opportunities for differentiation and value creation in the business connectivity arena could soon enter an unprecedented phase, brought about by a network capabilities-driven evolution that combines AI and Machine Learning, believes Wilson. "Intelligent connectivity could be the key distinguishing feature that gives one partner an edge over another," he stated. "It's likely to be a deciding factor in how channel partners secure more business and build their own unique selling propositions. AI and connectivity intelligence will build greater value in the connectivity market by offering channel partners a way to be more dynamic."

Connectivity intelligence is based on technology that enables networks to become more agile, efficient and responsive to evolving demands. "The way this is applied differs from business to business, whether that's using data analytics or AI to manage and deliver, even anticipate, what the customer needs," added Wilson. "For our partners that means connectivity that adapts to the specific

needs of their customers on a case-to-case basis."

According to Wilson, AI will fulfil a transformative role across the connectivity spectrum and by leveraging Machine Learning the network providers can manage congestion and capacity by analysing network traffic patterns and allocating bandwidth accordingly. "It can make us a lot more dynamic," stated Wilson. "AI can also monitor CPE to detect early warning signs of potential failure and signal proactive maintenance."

"In terms of security, AI can identify threats and enable preventive measures. Network optimisation will also benefit from AI intelligently routing traffic based on factors like load, latency and available capacity. Internally, AI can automate routine tasks and provide strategic insights, increasing operational efficiency. We are currently working on AIOps with our vendors to be more efficient in resolving issues and spotting trends."

AI also shows much promise in the context of the SD-WAN revolution, enabling optimisation of existing



Neil Wilson

AI-driven optimisation can result in improved network performance, including faster speeds, lower latency, higher security and more reliability

physical infrastructure. Wilson cited dynamic path selection as an example of this, providing intelligent traffic routing through the network based on real-time conditions such as latency and congestion. "AI can power all the benefits of a dynamic network and partners can use it to create a highly bespoke service, whereas connectivity has previously been a homogenous market," added Wilson.

While there is growing interest and discussion around intelligent connectivity, adoption is still in the early stages, particularly in smaller markets, observed Wilson. "But with advancements in

AI and cloud technologies I expect we will see more businesses exploring and adopting intelligent connectivity solutions in the future," he commented.

AI-driven optimisation

That said, AI is already used in the industry to monitor, manage and optimise networks, as well as detect and prevent cyberattacks. Intelligent connectivity also enables PXC to explore the development of self-healing and self-organising networks that can adapt to changing conditions and demands. "AI-driven optimisation can result in improved network performance, including faster speeds, lower latency, higher security and greater reliability

– translating to better user experiences," added Wilson.

Another possibility presented by AI and adaptable connectivity is the concept of high watermark or usage-based pricing, pointed out Wilson. "This means that if a customer uses a specific capacity on a line they pay for that capacity," he said. "However, while the potential for usage-based pricing is there the technology and underlying economics still needs to catch up. AI and connectivity intelligence will likely play a role in realising this potential."

The upshot of all this is that channel partners would be wise to think more 'intelligently' about their connectivity options for today and tomorrow, and build into those considerations the expanded scope for innovation unleashed by AI. "I expect the user experience will become centred around a blend of network optimisation and innovation," said Wilson. "Network optimisation ensures seamless and efficient connectivity which directly impacts the user experience. AI can enhance this by intelligently managing network traffic, predicting and mitigating potential issues, and ensuring optimal performance."

"On the other hand, innovation driven by AI can lead to the development of new beneficial features and capabilities. These could include personalised services, predictive functionalities and advanced security features. The potential is immense. A balanced focus on both optimisation and innovation would give users a reliable, efficient and forward-thinking connectivity experience." ■

Leading UK Broadcaster & Alliance Communications Customer Gets Red Carpet Connectivity In Cannes



Case Study

Our partner, Alliance Communications, required assistance supporting their customer, a leading UK broadcasting company. The broadcaster was exhibiting at MIPCOM, an annual expo at the famed Le Palais des Festivals in Cannes.

Despite the venue being state-of-the-art, it did not have any connectivity. As a result, they required a stable and resilient internet connection with WiFi access across the site for the sales staff and wider team.

The Solution

Following a site survey undertaken by the Cloudcell Team, the venue was assessed and presented a few key challenges:

1. Localised cell flooding
2. A heavily congested Starlink environment

To resolve these issues, we employed powerful Poynting directional antennas to gain connectivity from distant cell towers, thereby avoiding the localised congestion.

These 5G connections were then bonded with a Starlink, and appropriately traffic-managed, to deliver a high-quality connection for the duration of the MIPCOM event. Next, to deliver WiFi both

inside and out the venue, we utilised a large mesh of access points. This required significant traffic and channel management due to the large number of users on the network, across the site.

Finally, to ensure everything ran smoothly, a Cloudcell engineer was on-site to support the client throughout the duration of the event.

Cloudcell provided excellent support, expertise and service, adding value from the initial solution design through to the implementation and ongoing management. It's extremely reassuring to have a reliable partner with expertise in 5G connectivity that truly adds value.

Miles Watson, Managing Director, Alliance Communications

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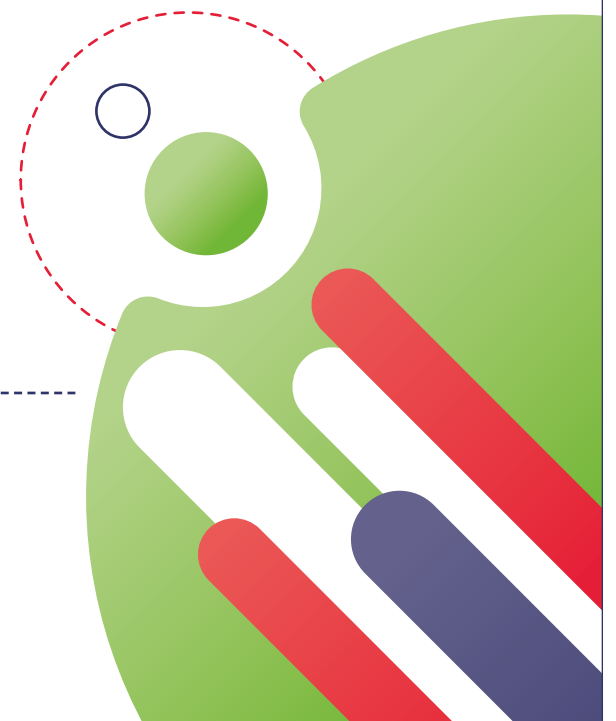


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AI-analytics front-runners

AI and analytics are shaping up to be the critical drivers of business transformation and partner differentiation, and securing a slice of this soon-to-be ubiquitous source of competitive advantage requires immediate attention, according to industry experts at last month's Comms Dealer Channel Forecast insight session. Among the issues under discussion were the speed of change, how the channel needs to react and where we can expect to find the greatest returns.

The impact of AI and analytics will be seismic, but a Comms Dealer survey of reseller and MSP business leaders showed that barely any respondents are mindful of AI as a future growth market. It's simply not blipping on their radar screens as a strategic priority. Over two thirds are not involved in analytics... hardly a recipe for the channel to exploit the fast evolving AI revolution. But forecasting the ICT market through an AI lens can only mean one thing – fundamental and inevitable disruption – and tomorrow's winners will be working out their AI and analytics strategies today. So no surprise that our Channel Forecasters are united in urging resellers and MSPs to prioritise their response to AI.

"Not to get involved with AI and analytics now would be a mistake because of its fast pace of development," stated Matt Bodsworth, Head of Operations, Inform Billing. "In the past, analytics and AI have been a black art requiring a team of people – data analysts and data engineers – to build and analyse the data. As a collective, vendors are

taking that pain away and packaging solutions. The sooner partners start on this journey the quicker they will learn how AI and analytics can transform businesses."

The big market opportunity will emerge in the SMB space driven by the switch to cloud, noted John de Breij, Solutions Architect, Intermedia. "AI is accelerating because of the cloud," he stated. "There remains AI on-premise of course, but it's niche and for bigger organisations able to invest. The beauty of the cloud is that APIs and AI combined make it accessible to SMBs. Innovation around AI is already moving at light speed and will accelerate over the coming years. It's time to get on the bandwagon."

Tony Martino, CEO, Tollring, also noted that cloud has paved the way for significant disruption, driving innovation with AI unleashing new capabilities for SMBs. "There is a massive opportunity within SMB," he added. "The more complicated enterprise solutions are now in the cloud and we're able to deliver fantastic technology, capabilities and outcomes to the SMB space at an affordable price point. The



Matt Bodsworth

AI and analytics are more of a mindset and part of core business strategy rather than a one-off activity

big opportunities are around integration with the likes of Microsoft Teams and Zoom, bringing that multi-vendor UC environment together to deliver information that's consistent across all toolkits customers are using. The key is to keep it simple and deliver a holistic understanding using analytics across a multi-play. It's about creating a unified proposition

and finding the right vendor that can make it easy to consume and delivers real value out of the box, all as part of the overall solution rather than an afterthought."

Unprecedented impact

What came through strongly from the discussion is just how big an impact AI and analytics will have, and the potential scale of value

creation at stake. But Ian Rowan, Country Manager, Wildix, cautioned that legacy approaches to analytics and AI could be a block to progress unless a new alignment is achieved. "There is an issue relating to how analytics has been historically sold in the channel as a bolt-on to, for example, a seven year solution with the statistics package contracted to only a year," he explained. "The analytics element gets forgotten and skills in the channel also get lost. The models are different and need to align. Encouragingly, more telecoms resellers and MSPs are selling on shorter cycles which matches what the analytics companies are doing."

Another strong technology match is likely to catalyse this market exponentially, observed Jonathan McKenzie, Senior Contact Centre Product Manager, 8x8. "The combination of contact centres, AI and analytics is a marriage made in heaven," he stated. "You have all the channels, all the customer experiences, and there is a big opportunity to provide bots and use AI and analytics to free up agents' time, enabling them

8x8 set to take decisive lead



John de Breij

Innovation around AI is already moving at light speed and will accelerate over the coming years. It's time to get on the bandwagon

to focus on empathetic use cases. The analytics sits in the background, constantly learning and delivering new insights. Showing the value in bundles is the foundation for success. It's all about understanding the use cases, so start small."

McKenzie also highlighted that 8x8 is bringing AI into many different customer scenarios, and he urged the channel to invest in education and training while forging strong relationships to build an ecosystem of vendors. "There's many different players in the market and they all bring valuable technology and use cases," he added. "Removing the complexities for customers is where you can add value, while being an advisor around new products

and services and helping them on that journey."

Information sharing

A major determining factor of AI's impact in the channel will come from vendors' ability to harness the technology and their insight, simplify propositions and educate partners in a fully joined up approach. "We must make sure we're educating the channel," commented Rowan. "We get to see it first, use it first, understand our use cases, and we have the use cases of our peers. We need to share that experience because until people understand what we're providing we can't establish the value. We need to create an information sharing community and ensure everyone is aligned and understands what we

are aiming to achieve. AI is a profession, not a skill, and we need to deliver that to the channel as a readily available packaged product that provides value... not make it a black art. This is a big opportunity for resellers, but only if they understand that opportunity. It needs to be simple and show value – tick box rather than API based."

How to start and keep up with developments in AI is a challenging prospect, and Bodsworth agrees that the key to success resides in a programme of enlightenment. "Education will determine how far analytics and AI becomes a mainstream product," he stated. "Many of the partners we talk to don't have an understanding of AI or analytics. But to get to grips with this and how it works it should be implemented as a core part of the business, so we're looking at how to leverage the data partners already gain as part of their day-to-day business and use it to influence decisions. AI and analytics is more a mindset and something you do as part of core business strategy rather than a one-off activity; and partners need to understand the benefits and use it in an effective way. So get on the journey as fast as you can."

Cutting across these market developments is how to package and sell AI and analytics in a way that creates a compelling case for value creation. This means addressing the strategic question of simplification as well as education, especially when it comes to the most fertile ground for AI and analytics. "The contact centre has traditionally been a niche area for specialists

but with the cloud you have operational channels in just a few simple clicks," added de Breij. "In the old days, if you wanted to integrate a contact centre application into a knowledge base it was proprietary and took a lot of time, but with generative AI you can create a knowledge base integration that guides an agent throughout a conversation very easily. Cloud makes all the integrations that were niche and complex easy to enable and consume. You don't need to be a big MSP to sell contact centre. Sales people who can sell the contact centre story can get into this market."

McKenzie noted that the simplification of continuous interaction between real-time data, AI-powered insights and customer engagement is high on 8x8's agenda.

"We're exploring AI driven customer intelligence and how to present that through a real-time dashboard looking at conversation intelligence, engagement, the AI predictions and analysis of the customer journey," he explained. "As the AI evolves you can make real-time decisions based on models and scenarios. Because there is so much information to drill into it's about providing data in a way that can be easily digested and quickly understood."

The discussion highlighted many other potential uplifts from AI and analytics, and Inform Billing partners are also likely to experience strategic gains given the work it is doing on available data that could prove to be competitively transformative, while helping partners to

Continued on page 16



Tony Martino

The big opportunities are around bringing that multi-vendor UC environment together to deliver information that's consistent across all toolkits



Ian Rowan

AI is a profession, not a skill, and we need to provide that to the channel as a readily available packaged product that delivers value. Not make it a black art

Continued from page 15 understand what AI means for their business. "As a billing provider we're exposed to much of the data that drives businesses and we're looking to pull that together into a central portal," said Bodsworth. "Partners see analytics and AI as complicated so we need to take that complexity away with tools that are simply put together. The sooner people do this the more likely they are to get more intuitive and start to understand how analytics and AI links together and works.

"For example, working with a customer we found that the value of what they sell changes drastically according to sector. We're able to give them an interactive chart that shows performance by different verticals and how that might factor into the likelihood of retaining business based on past experience. We then forecast

that to six months or two years based on what's currently happening."

AI mindset

Inform Billing's approach also shows us that the application of AI and analytics is only part of the story. It's just as important to instil a data-first culture, a mindset. On the flip side, resellers and MSPs stand to lose market share against companies supercharged by an AI advantage. It is also clear for all to see that the front-runners who shape new insights from data will quickly steal a march on sluggish competitors, which will give them an unbeatable advantage resulting in the rise of new market leaders. And it's only just getting properly started.

So it is necessary to overcome barriers to entry by taking small steps at first, starting with an understanding of the basics and where the low hanging fruit can be

found. "The goals of AI combined with analytics are to make businesses more productive and efficient, and it's relevant to any business," observed de Breij. "The place to start is with cloud. The pay and consume-as-you-go model means AI has become more accessible and affordable for any type of business. The goal is to apply AI and analytics in an easy way and make it simple to scale up and down without any heavy lifting. That's why it is perfectly suited to the SMB space."

Martino observed that another big opportunity exists within the informal contact centre where knowledge workers and customer-facing teams require clever queuing, first contact resolution type KPIs, and the ability to keep customers happy without the requirement for a large complex contact centre. Martino also noted that Tolling is leveraging AI in terms of sales pitch analysis to identify the sales people who are able to convert opportunities quicker and the reasons underpinning their success. "This empowers the right

processes to skill people up," he added. "Other examples of AI use cases include automated compliance monitoring, making sure recorded private data is automatically redacted such as credit card information, and toll fraud prevention."

AI and analytics are fast emerging as major differentiation factors with early movers standing to gain the most from this revolution. And as we have seen, our Channel Forecasters shed light on the current phase of AI development, which primarily builds on existing applications of the technology but in a much bigger and broader way, facilitated in large part by the cloud. The big question for the whole channel... when to take advantage of these game-changing developments? "Analytics and AI have been here for a long time but it's become much more powerful, more accessible, and it's an exciting journey," said Rowan. "We're going to see lots of change delivered quickly. People will specialise in this sector and you need to make sure you're on that journey." ■



Jonathan McKenzie

Start with single use cases that focus on the specifics of value and benefits

More key points to consider...

It's about having an understanding of how you want to deliver these services in a uniform way so customers consume it seamlessly, rather than engage in a heavy lifting exercise.

Tony Martino, CEO, Tollring

Partners need to understand the technology they are selling by utilising it effectively in their own business.

Ian Rowan, Country Manager, Wildix

If you don't understand the technology by not using it you are setting yourself up for failure.

Jonathan McKenzie, Senior Contact Centre Product Manager, 8x8

Analytics is a big focus for us. We've done a big push over the past two years to get our house in order.

Matt Bodsworth, Head of Operations, Inform Billing

The biggest opportunity for MSPs is to generate more revenue and add more value with AI applied to UCaaS and CCaaS – and the cloud is the perfect foundation

John de Breij, Solutions Architect, Intermedia

Contact centre is one part of the overall solution, we mustn't forget the back office. Much of the traction around the analytics and AI we deliver is augmenting what's happening in the contact centre along with the rest of the business.

Tony Martino, CEO, Tollring

The big opportunity is in offering the same customer experience across multiple languages.

Jonathan McKenzie, Senior Contact Centre Product Manager, 8x8

There will be a lot of AI functionality added to the market – so gain confidence with a few customers and get ready for the future.

John de Breij, Solutions Architect, Intermedia

Visit the Comms Dealer website to see video highlights of this insight session.



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Dotlines UK ramps up

Incoming Dotlines UK CEO Jaki Chowdhury aims to replicate the market impact of this Asian-based ICT powerhouse in the UK, combining proven technology with a flourishing sustainability ethos.



Jaki Chowdhury

Why did you take the role of Dotlines UK CEO?

The technology heritage of Dotlines, which was established in 2004, its move into the telecom services sector in 2016 and collective impact in the Southeast Asian market is inspiring. Furthermore, the UK telecom market has stagnated and a step change is needed to break the deadlock. I believe the technology, customer focus and societal and environmental values of Dotlines can catalyse that change.

How do you define telco market stagnation?

The stagnation is deep rooted across every organisation. There is a relentless push from these companies looking to move from a classic telco positioning role to more of a technology-telecoms position. This is failing due to complex and legacy operating models and systems leading to an unrealistic cost of change. Being tech-driven, Dotlines is well positioned to bridge this gap in the telcos space. The heritage of Dotlines incorporates home grown systems, both sound

ecological and societal values and an optimised customer centric approach distils down the true nature of 'digital transformation' that customers are seeking.

How will your prior experience come into play?

My career spans 18 years in the telecommunications industry working across BT, Vodafone and TalkTalk, covering product, commercial and transformation roles in senior positions. During this time I launched various milestone products such as BT's first Wi-Fi router, a full fibre product, SD-WAN and a mobile private network with 5G at Vodafone. I also played a pivotal role in shutting down legacy exchanges at TalkTalk to accelerate Britain's gigabit economy.

In what ways will Dotlines UK make its mark as a purposeful organisation?

Dotlines is a new brand in the UK and we want to be known as a company that champions customer experience by giving back to the planet and society. We want people to get to know the real us: We're a team, a company, a family with a bigger purpose – a purpose that's not purely

about making profit for shareholders but uses profit to fuel our mission to champion customers, planet and society and ultimately lead change. We would love to become B Corp certified at some point in the near future to further prove our commitments to these areas.

What is your strategy from a technology perspective?

We will address the UK market with three propositions: Carnival Internet, a new retail ISP for home and business; Audra WAN, security and firewall for SoHo and SMB; and Purplecube360 (an end-to-end modular software ecosystem) for SMB, retail and reseller markets to manage customer lifecycles in a single place. While Carnival Internet will target both B2C and B2B, Audra and Purplecube will be purely B2B.

Audra Security is a simpler way for small and medium sized businesses

to manage their Internet use and security. For SMEs, security is an expensive and technologically complex field that they often cut corners on due to a lack of skills or funds. Our aspiration is to make it more accessible than ever from an affordability and ease of use perspective. While these product families deliver different capabilities we will use them all to fuel our brand aspiration of 'simplifying business, simplifying life', while championing our positive impact initiatives.

Which industry trends interest you most?

Small and medium sized businesses are becoming more aware of the need for effective security such as firewalls, and the subsequent demand for affordable products is rising. Broadband and mobile customers are fed-up with terrible customer service and constant yearly price rises. This, in particular, is a trend forced onto retail ISPs driven by major

network and infrastructure providers and needs to be stopped. Ofcom will have to play a big role in forcing this change. Current Ofcom proposals give customers more price certainty and clarity by moving from a variable percentage metric to a fixed monetary value, but this needs to go much further with more pressure on the largest players to stop the practice altogether.

Which new technology areas are on your radar screen?

The Generative AI movement and its applications. The Purplecube360 platform with its contact centre capability (known as Pulse) can significantly leverage Generative AI in terms of proactive customer communications, accurate diagnostics and ticketing. While Pulse is fully equipped with Machine Learning capabilities and its Visual IVR is interactive enough, the Generative AI feature set can make things much simpler with the proprietary Right First Time matrix.

If you could transform any area of the ICT industry, what would it be?

I want to make CRM systems more affordable for the IT and comms industry so that more end customers benefit from frictionless services across sell, build and run processes

Where do you see Dotlines UK in three years time?

We would love to see Carnival Internet having a community of around 100,000 broadband subscribers and using that customer base to help fuel our aspiration of planting trees, donating to charity and more. ■



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Why it's time to remodel

The future look of the channel's UC and collaboration market winners is being reshaped according to industry experts at BT Wholesale's Partner Plus event staged 28th February, Birmingham. A key insight session also emphasised significant UC-based growth opportunities and spotlighted the market trends that resellers would be wise to strategically consider today.



The UC market is becoming more multifaceted, increasingly competitive and a growing area of strategic importance for ICT resellers and MSPs, therefore picking the right strategy will be key to standing out from the pack and securing long-term success. And according to Gareth Bleasdale, Modern Workplace Lead, Microsoft, there are opportunities to deliver product categories into customers (including SMB) that didn't even exist 12 months ago. "Think about how you can start that relationship by delivering a critical workload to a customer, like calling, then extending to tools such as AI-based meetings, generative AI like Copilot, cloud PC and videoconferencing," he stated. "These are

mechanisms to attach high revenue, high margin services and to build an ongoing customer relationship."

Experimentation
Given the fast rate of market change Bleasdale also noted the importance of experimentation and agility. "Technology is evolving rapidly and the message to consumers is changing," he added. "How we articulate the benefits and create commercial models is ripe for creativity. So explore different models and see what works."

While the definition of UC is broadening and the opportunity to consider a range of models is growing, reseller and MSP challenges remain in terms of truly understanding customer use cases. This is proving to be a major block to higher cloud migration

Technology is evolving rapidly, the message to consumers is changing and how we articulate the benefits and create commercial models is ripe for creativity. So explore different approaches and see what works

levels, believes Andrew Small, Director of Voice, BT. He strongly advocates a customer approach that is personalised to particular needs rather than delivering a pre-configured package off the shelf. "I speak to a lot of customers, big, small and medium, and use cases are key," he stated.

"It's easy to think that businesses are doing the same thing but the details around the edge are very different. Their business cases are not the same. Even within

verticals use cases differ. We must collectively understand these nuances because the reason that many businesses haven't moved to cloud is in their use case. Making sure we understand that is important."

Cloud shift
Small noted that half of the market still hasn't moved to the cloud but he believes that over the coming five years most of them will migrate. "In terms of opportunities, that is the big one," he added. "Furthermore, people

are working in more places while others are returning to offices that may not be equipped to give them as good an experience as working from home. This technology provision trend will also arrive at an equilibrium over the coming years. Companies of all sizes want their people to be more productive, more motivated and collaborate better – AI will help with that, as well as have an impact on security."

Another key trend is the growing requirement

UC strategies



Collaboration market success

the AI we are familiar with is text-based, where the AI looks at messages, email and documents," he explained. "But with recent announcements around real-time media modules AI is expanding into audio and video. In the context of a meeting or conversation AI could look at body language, tone of voice, facial expressions and inflections. The tools that could be developed around understanding what occurred in a meeting and summarising are exciting."

Optimisation

Macpherson also pointed to the rise of AI codecs where AI segments the speech elements of a conversation and manages the amount of bandwidth required for crystal clear audio, meaning up to 20 per cent less bandwidth while still getting super high quality audio.

"Similarly, generative AI video codecs are doing the same for super high resolution video," he stated. "The ability for us to deliver these high quality experiences to customers is not far away."

Brown agrees that AI codecs will be 'massive from a UC perspective' but he also raised the question of whether many SMBs have the budget to invest in the next wave of AI-driven UC innovation. "AI is everywhere but we are seeing especially in the UC market that the price point isn't there yet," he cautioned. "Moreover, poor adoption of AI can have catastrophic impacts, therefore education is key."

Education across the board is a strong driver of useful adoption and there is a significant opportunity for resellers and MSPs to make

their mark by combining a programme of education with lifecycle service provision, according to Macpherson. He pointed out that in many cases the customer doesn't really understand what they've bought, how to use and get the best out of their investment and expand the solution across their organisation.

"That makes renewal much harder," he commented. "There is a whole raft of cloud technology we are offering and we need to ensure it is easy to buy, easy to deploy and easy to use. So make sure you are supporting customers not just around the sale but the whole life cycle. If we can help and support customers to fully adopt their solutions it creates a much stickier service and leads to a much easier and more valuable renewal."

Bleasdale believes that a compelling UC and collaboration proposition will also help to overcome cloud solution inertia on the part of SMBs. "For many of these customers voice is a standalone application and we have to ask why that is," he stated. "For some the return isn't quite there. But we can offer a fundamentally different experience through UC and collaboration that, for example, enables real-time translation for non-English speakers, or enables contextual recall to jog minds on what has been said in a phone conversation.

"These types of features are helpful and the experiences are impactful for a business. AI and the contextualised use of AI brought together inside a platform that securely protects data is a great channel opportunity." ■

for resellers to manage multifaceted priorities and strike the right balance between current and future customer demands, observed Jacob Brown, Head of Product, Daisy Communications. "Customers are presenting service providers with more complex requests, prompting the need for greater flexibility in their offerings," he stated. "Additionally, there's a call for service providers to simplify their plans to better accommodate customer demands, while ensuring that their products can effectively meet the evolving needs of their growing client base."

According to James Macpherson, Collaboration Lead, Cisco, the coming five years will see the rise and adoption of 'amazing immersive experiences'. "Most of

5 questions every business should ask before seeking finance

The current landscape, influenced by factors like technology, market volatility, and evolving consumer behaviours, means that businesses are required to stay agile and where possible, financially secure. Whether it's adapting to digital transformation, managing cash flow in fluctuating markets, or capitalising on emerging possibilities, the right financial support can be a game-changer.

To help you understand whether it's the right time for you to be considering finance options, we've compiled five questions that every business should ask before submitting any applications.

1. What is your current financial health?

Before seeking external funding, it's vital that you understand your business's financial health. This involves way more than just looking at your current bank balance. It's about analysing cash flow trends over time, understanding your debt-to-income ratio, and forecasting future revenues with as much precision as possible. This deep dive into your accounts will help you to understand your immediate needs and how additional financing will affect your business in the long term.

2. Why do you need financing?

Clarity on why you need financing is essential. Whether it's for expansion, bridging a cash flow gap, or investing in new technology – it's crucial to understand exactly how the funds will be used. This knowledge will help you in selecting the right financing option and measuring the impact over time. It's a step that should align your financial strategy with your overall business objectives, ensuring that every

pound borrowed works towards delivering concrete, strategic goals.

3. Which financing option is right for you?

Evaluate each option's suitability based on your business model, the amount required, repayment terms, ethics (where the money comes from) and how it aligns with your businesses long-term goals.

Traditional loans might offer the security of fixed terms, but may not be as flexible as other options. On the other hand, cash acceleration will suit businesses with strong recurring revenue models. This step involves a detailed comparison of different financial products, assessing them against your business's cash flow patterns, repayment capacity, and growth plans.

4. Have you considered the risks and benefits?

Every financial decision carries its own set of risks and benefits. For instance, while a loan might provide the necessary capital for expansion, it also brings with it the responsibility of regular repayments that could strain your cash flow. Borrowing against existing contracts is all very well, but what happens if you lose a large customer and have to repay the advance?

5. How does financing align with your long-term objectives?

Finally, if you do decide that it's the right time to raise finance, it's important to understand how the chosen financing option fits into your long-term plan? Will it help you in building a solid foundation for future growth or offer flexibility for adapting to changes in the market? This perspective ensures that the financial decisions you make today are steps towards future success, rather than just short-term solutions.

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Harnessing a new era in a

Who better to shed light on the benefits of advanced automation for telcos than a problem solving theoretical physicist on a mission to maximise value from data and systems. Enter Traverse Automation CEO John O’Neill...

Every telco should take a serious look at their approach to automation, believes O’Neill, especially when you consider how these problem solving tools are evolving. And especially when you take into account his authority on the subject. O’Neill began his career as a theoretical physicist and entered the industry as a mathematical modeller working in the defence and nuclear industries. He then moved into software development and over time worked as an analyst, architect and consultant. After taking an MBA he shifted into more commercial areas and built revenue management and optimisation tools.

“Twenty five years ago I started to automate business processes and became hooked on solving complex problems involving automation and data, and 17 years ago Traverse Automation was born,” stated O’Neill. “After working in mobile, billing and strategy development across telecoms I became fascinated by automation and data within the industry

and saw that a lot of work needed to be done to help businesses in this sector.”

O’Neill set up Traverse Automation to automate complex processes, starting with a small team that worked with large organisations across a multitude of sectors, more recently adding AI and intelligence to the automation. “We focus on solving common problems for industries within the UK in back-office areas such as document matching, automation and reporting,” he stated. “We are now driven by the evolution of AI more than ever before. It’s critical to understand how AI is evolving and its capabilities. There is little point in building a complex solution that AI will solve better in a few months time.”

Seven years ago O’Neill was similarly ‘blown away’ by what the large technology platforms were adding to technology businesses, prompting Traverse Automation to build a new version of its platform. “We also re-engineered to AWS and used best practice



John O’Neill

After working in mobile, billing and strategy development across telecoms I became fascinated by automation and data within the industry

technology,” he added. “These improvements made our technology capabilities skyrocket. Recently, we have started to build data fabrics that will revolutionise how we help customers better use their data.”

Scaling up

These advancements are on the cusp of further acceleration as Traverse Automation scales up, boosted by investment from Maven Equity Finance last year. “Since then, our growth has been crazy,” noted O’Neill. “We have doubled turnover during the last eight months and expect to reach £3 million revenue this year.”

Traverse Automation currently employs 30 staff members, most of whom hold a degree or advanced degree in maths, physics or computer science. Their know-how underpins the company’s focus on delivering tailored automation solutions for the telecoms sector to enhance efficiency and drive innovation. Its target markets include service providers, network operators and enterprises.

“It’s unusual for a SME like us to work with many large businesses such as Babble, Booking.com, Kuoni and Travel Counsellors,” stated O’Neill. “We thrive from seeing these businesses

become more efficient and make operational savings.”

Collaborations

O’Neill expects Traverse Automation’s proposition to evolve with emerging technologies, emphasising the rise of AI-driven automation and deeper collaborations within the industry. “Even companies that would have built everything themselves a few years back are now choosing partners and integrating their components into solutions,” commented O’Neill.

“We collaborate with key technology partners to integrate cutting-edge



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Automation ND sense eases HR headaches

AI, Machine Learning and robotics into our offerings. Our own automation platform sits on a mixture of AWS and Azure infrastructure and integrates with modern AI services."

Top priority

O'Neill's immediate priority is to help mid-sized telcos to automate and gain insights from their data, which he recognises is a massive issue for them. "Without good quality data it's difficult to leverage the full power of AI and automation," added O'Neill. "Most telcos are not sure how to solve their problems and improve their business. But from an automation perspective, more and more suppliers support APIs to exchange data so much more can be automated than ever before. In the past, we would automate bulk simple processes but AI has made it possible to also consider automating low-volume, complex processes. Where APIs don't exist there are tools and techniques to create automations."

According to O'Neill, the automation of SMEs is the biggest under-served market. Meanwhile, large enterprises are using technology such as UiPath and Blue Prism to self-automate, but they are a big cost to any organisation and O'Neill believes that using Traverse Automation's in-house technology the speed at which SMEs can get the benefit of automation will be revolutionised. "This is because we have embraced the data fabric from a strategic perspective," he stated. "This approach to delivering data solutions underpins analysis and reporting as quickly and robustly as possible."

Just a minute with John O'Neill...

Your role models: Albert Einstein: I admire how creative and brilliant he was more than 100 years ago. Milton Erickson for his brilliant use of language in helping people change. And Rocky Marciano who had so many limitations but nevertheless achieved through mental toughness.

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

Best advice you have been given: Balance is the answer to most of life's problems.

In hindsight... I would have embraced the use of technology partners sooner and built less from scratch.

Three ideal dinner guests: Christopher Hitchens, who was smart, funny and brutally honest; Morrissey because The Smiths were my teenage music heroes; and Mike Tyson, one of the greats from my childhood.

Tell us something about yourself we don't know: I have studied psychology, hypnosis and the brain for 20 years.

Your main strength and what could you work on? Problem solving is what I enjoy the most, and I've problem solved in so many different areas of my career. Small talk is not my strong point.

What is the key to leadership success? Having a vision that you can communicate to others clearly.

What do you fear most? Not making a difference.

One example of something you have overcome? Depression as a child and adult has been something I've not experienced for 30 years.

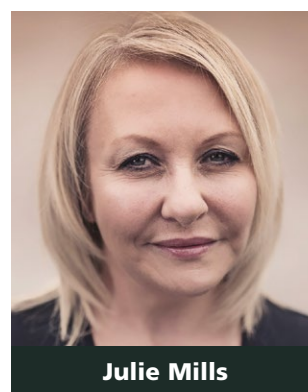
Top tip: Put some fixed time and headroom aside (which is not negotiable) to improve your business – and manage day-to-day operations with what is left over.

Pursuing the HR agenda through a neuro-inclusive lens empowers business leaders to personalise people management across the whole workforce, writes neurodiversity (ND) champion and Train to Win CEO Julie Mills.

As much as the channel's business leaders want their people to achieve peak performance the reality is that there's already enough to deal with in keeping everyday HR issues on an even keel. Yet how we manage our talent makes all the difference, and I believe that a more neurodivergence-friendly organisation can significantly reduce the risk of HR challenges arising, including staff churn, demoralised employees and communication breakdowns within teams. How? Because an ND-friendly approach prevents perfectly happy and capable ND employees from becoming 'HR problems'. Also, you'll be adopting a framework that better accommodates all individuals' needs, whether they are neurotypical, have a neurodivergent diagnosis or are somewhere in between.

Social expectations

Having someone leave the business can be disruptive, and recruiting and training a replacement is costly. A surprisingly common reason for ND people to leave an employer is when they feel they can't escape the expectation of participating in staff socials and other team events. Promoting an accepting environment



Julie Mills

where it's OK not to take part without being seen as weird or not a team player could help you retain staff, especially those who haven't told anyone they are neurodivergent, or may not even know themselves.

Draconian policies

Demoralised or demotivated employees affect productivity, delivery, quality and performance. But many business leaders simply do not understand why certain employees are demotivated, or what triggers a sudden negative impact on morale. A recent example I came across was a company that introduced an IT policy banning dark mode from all apps (when backgrounds default to black and text to white instead of vice versa). While that might be a tad disappointing for neurotypical users who prefer dark mode, it's devastating to some users on the autistic spectrum

who rely on dark mode to concentrate and avoid sensory overload. Simply being aware of these issues should be enough to avoid unintended consequences.

Lack of flexibility

Communication breakdown within teams, particularly between line managers and their subordinates, can have a huge performance impact, erode trust and create friction between colleagues. The issue is often centred around flexibility, with line managers needing to learn how to be more accommodating to individual needs. A common complaint I hear is ND people not starting work on time, driving line managers bananas. Such a big deal over 10 minutes of lateness, but I'll bet it happens in hundreds of workplaces. If the employee does all their work and makes the time up, the fact they find it hard to factor a 9am start into their routine shouldn't matter.

If you're experiencing difficulties like these in your business my advice is to fix them by taking an approach that's more sensitive to staff neurodiversity. Not just for those who are ND... it makes sense to take a more individual and personalised approach to managing your whole workforce.

Elite Group demerger cat

The demerger of Elite Group into two separate businesses operating under the umbrella of New Technology Group (NTG) creates an opportunity to comprehensively maximise IT and comms market potential and realise the group's goal to treble in size and hit £100 million revenue, according to CEO Adam Turton.

The demerger of the comms and IT services part of Elite Group into two separate trading companies addresses the fundamental question of how to most effectively address these markets, believes Turton. The restructure sees Elite maintain its focus on comms while the Netcentrix brand (acquired in 2016) has been resurrected to focus on IT managed services. The move is a key pillar of Turton's long-term vision and follows a strategic review of the business that also advances his customer value and experience ambitions.

"Organising our company this way provides greater focus on execution, enabling us to offer more value, technology and innovation to Elite Group and Netcentrix customers," explained Turton. "This approach enables the delivery of specialised and tailored solutions with

increased agility, optimising the experience for customers and meeting specific requirements with precision."

Elite currently employs close to 170 people across the group and has circa 3,000 customers incorporating small, medium, large and enterprise segments covering a range of vertical markets. Adjusted trading for this financial year will be relatively flat and in line with budget. But importantly, underlying UCaaS and CCaaS recurring revenues are growing organically at 10 per cent.

For Netcentrix, adjusted trading this financial year will show 10 per cent organic revenue growth with underlying recurring revenues growing at 19 per cent, delivered by incremental fixed recurring revenues for Microsoft Azure services including cloud infrastructure and Azure Virtual Desktop, as well as growth in



Adam Turton

Modern Workplace services. Turton also expects to see additional and consistent incremental growth in professional services.

"Our ambition is to treble the size of the group over the next three to five years to £100 million revenue through a combination of organic growth and M&A," stated Turton. "The demerger represents the first step in executing our growth strategy. It was clear to me that with the right focus we could be doing more for customers. Furthermore, the opportunity that exists in both the cloud communications and outsourced IT support and managed services market is significant to say the least, and one we must

AI will be transformational and the single greatest differentiator and driver of value for UCaaS and CCaaS over the next five years. Many use cases already exist

capitalise on. These changes enable us to diversify our technology revenues, target more markets with more technology and with a greater combined capability, meaning we can accelerate growth and reinvestment into the business."

Immediate impact

Although the demerger is officially launched this month the group is several

months into a soft launch with a demerge already implemented in a number of departments. "Customers will feel the benefits of this change almost immediately, with the positive impact to growth and profitability following 12 to 18 months later," said Turton.

He also noted that the demerger hasn't involved redundancies within either

Analyses growth

business, but instead will create opportunities to expand teams across both companies with fresh, specialist talent. "This is key because the longer-term priority for both businesses is associated with sustainable development, a proactive approach towards the planet, people, society and profit," commented Turton. "Not forgetting that our people are our biggest asset."

In terms of the leadership structure for each business, Elite's current Chief Commercial Officer, Pete Jury, has been appointed Interim Managing Director for Elite Group. In addition to Turton's role as Group CEO, he will be taking on the role of Interim Managing Director for Netcentrix. "These interim roles are in place to oversee the planned demerge and establish the new group structure," stated Turton. "The plan is to appoint permanent Managing Directors for both businesses post demerge."

Their priority areas will be distinct and sharply focused, with Elite Group doubling down on providing cloud communications services including connectivity, UC and UCaaS, contact centre and CCaaS leveraging conversational AI, voice services, mobile and IoT. "AI will be transformational and the single greatest differentiator and driver of value for UCaaS and CCaaS over the next five years," said Turton. "Many use cases for AI in both UCaaS and CCaaS already exist and leveraging this technology will be a critical part of our go to market for Elite Group. The immediate priority is on product market fit and working with key

vendors and strategic partners to redefine cloud communications and strengthen the technology proposition we provide."

From Netcentrix's perspective, the UK market is fragmented with thousands of MSPs and IT services companies making it ripe for consolidation, presenting a 'massive opportunity' for an ambitious and well-funded challenger brand like Netcentrix looking to grow both organically and via M&A. "Additionally, the lack of IT skills and high costs associated with data loss and downtime has led to cybersecurity emerging as the top priority for investment," added Turton. "We see cybersecurity and managed security services as a driver of value and a critical part of our go-to-market for Netcentrix."

Quest for value

The question of whether to demerge the comms and IT services parts of Elite Group at a time when organisations are looking for a one-stop-shop solution provider is an easy one to address, says Turton. "I challenge the conventional wisdom that says businesses are looking for a one-stop-shop solution provider," he stated. "I believe organisations and business leaders are looking for real value delivered via any number of strategic partnerships with different service providers. For us, it's about focusing on the quality of the service offering rather than the quantity of services offered."

According to Statista Market Insights, the UK IT services market will reach £70.1 billion by the end of this year and is forecast to grow by 35 per cent to £96

billion by the end of 2028. "Within this space, the outsourcing of IT support and managed services dominates the market, and the size of this opportunity was a factor in our decision to demerge IT services and communications," added Turton.

He pointed out that the overarching NTG business will support all group companies with execution of the strategy and M&A. "In the case of Netcentrix, we want to acquire additional capability and scale while also looking to expand our national coverage to strengthen our localised IT support model," added Turton. "Elite Group is also seeking to acquire for scale and capability as we look to strengthen our proposition in the large and enterprise business segments as well as the public sector. We are looking for targets now with a view to acquiring in the next 12 to 18 months."

By taking into full consideration everything that Turton is prioritising right now we can see that change management is high on his agenda. "Leading change is one of the most challenging priorities facing business leaders," he commented. "We regularly hear about companies suffering the consequences of not changing, so having the courage to be bold while embracing change and innovation is critical for success. Today's leadership priorities are also about articulating why the business exists and creating purpose driven companies that inspire and engage people. Culture and employee engagement has to be top of the agenda for business leaders." ■

How To Accelerate Your Business Further Forward

Remaining in pole position in an increasingly competitive business world and staying ahead of your rivals takes more than just a cool head and nerves of steel.

It requires innovation, finely-tuned skills and a well-run team that works together to optimise performance – in a fast moving technology arena. Choosing the right business partnerships can also significantly help accelerate profits and avoid being stuck in the slow lane.

Here at Evolve IP, we understand the complexities and nuances needed to form powerful and productive professional alliances. For us, it's about pouring more fuel on the fire to provide our resellers with a competitive market advantage and differentiate themselves in an increasingly commoditised market.

We recognise the importance of collaboration and sharing common goals to ultimately win more business and stay in front of the competition. It remains a key cornerstone of our ethos and evolution. Partnerships help create best-of-breed solutions and can unlock new doors, opportunities and deliver greater customer value and service.

Reflecting this mantra is our annual Partner Day to help resellers drive their businesses further forward. This day-long event takes place at the Williams Racing F1 Experience Centre in Grove, Oxfordshire on April 18th. It includes fun-related race activities as well as detailing Evolve IP's expanding product roadmap.

Insightful

We will be showcasing solutions, celebrating partners and knowledge sharing. In addition, there will be lots of fun F1-inspired activities throughout the day.

As a white-label cloud collaboration service provider we generated unprecedented growth and attracted record numbers of new partners last year. Now we're hailing

2024 as the 'year to sell' with new product innovations and enhanced levels of reseller support aiming to increase overall business performance.

As a global collaboration provider, we specialise in bringing together unified communications, collaboration tools, contact centre, voice, and omnichannel solutions securely into the cloud. Timing and having all the tools required can make a real difference. Understanding needs, listening and responding in a caring way can ensure you stand out from the crowd.

Technology never stands still so a series of insightful talks will be combined with interactive workshops as part of a 'driving inspired' day of fun and wisdom.

Productive partnerships are becoming ever-more prevalent in today's dynamic business world, where fluidity, versatility and innovation can help build long-term sustainable success. We don't believe in a one-size-fits-all approach as we never want our customers to compromise. We want to give them exactly what they want. The market is very demanding. We're growing and the market is growing too.

Driving force

Our ultimate objective is to enhance today's hybrid workplace and help make the future of work better for everyone. The Williams Experience Centre epitomises performance, dedication and a will to win - located at the home of the Williams Formula 1 team. We are looking forward to highlighting how as a 'well-oiled machine' we can lead from the front to propel our partners further forward. Evolve IP always goes the extra mile.

Don't get left behind but join us at our Partner Day and make the future of work better for everyone. Let Evolve IP be the driving force behind your business.

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Duo get off to a flying Start

Start Communications began life with a flourish and quickly established itself as an ICT provider of great note. Just four years into the project and with a string of awards already under its belt the company is poised to accelerate even further ahead this year, according to MD John Davis and Sales Director Richard Scott.



John Davis

Richard Scott

Davis and Scott set up West Sussex-based Start Communications in January 2020 with a mission to deliver UCaaS, cloud contact centre, connectivity and mobile services to SME businesses. Even though a start-up, the company boasted a strong pedigree from the outset based on the prior experiences of its founders. Davis kicked off his career in 1994 with a privately owned telecoms dealer in East Sussex and after a year set up his own dealership which he ran for 22 years prior to selling in 2018. "I was able to apply the valuable business lessons and experiences gained over the previous years and apply them to our new business," he stated.

Scott's entrance into the comms sector was less planned. While at Brighton University he worked part-time at Ted Baker where he

secured a record sale for the Brighton store. The customer gave Scott his business card and said if he ever wanted a career change to call him. "I did just that and ended up working for a major comms reseller for 10 years," stated Scott. "Having both spent a lot of time working in the industry we felt there was a gap in the market for a more agile and dynamic reseller that had more time and resource to spend directly on SME customers and helping them make the transition to the cloud."

The joint experiences of Davis and Scott quickly paid off with Start Communications picking up Gamma's Best Newcomer of the Year award in its first year. The company went on to win the CNA SME UC Solution award three years in a row. That's not all, in January this year Start Communications became a Gamma Gold Partner and hopes to

AI technology is going to radically reform the way we all work within the industry

secure Platinum Partner status within four years.

Meticulous approach

Davis attributes much of the company's success to a strong customer service ethos and a meticulous approach to expanding its portfolio. "Many telecoms companies rush to add value added services to their offerings, either because it seems that everyone else is doing the same or they think they could generate additional profits for little effort," he said. "Sadly, and all too often, this results in an ill-thought out launch with poor support. We only consider adding a product or service to our portfolio if it provides a valuable benefit to our customers and we can fully support it."

Right now Davis and Scott are considering an EPOS and energy service but they will only be launched if they pass stringent service level standards and can be supported to the highest level. "We also have ambitions to expand into cybersecurity and IT services," added Scott.

He noted that another immediate priority is to expand the support and sales teams. "The sales strategy will evolve considerably over the next couple of years as a result of the switch-off," added Scott. "IP products are generally more consumable and transferable than legacy services and this will drive more online based transactions. Self-service,

AI and automation will also be key to taking advantage of this market opportunity. We are investing heavily in automation across all areas of the business from sales processes to billing and support. This will free up more time to focus on helping customers. Concurrently, AI technology is going to radically reform the way we all work within the industry and I see this playing a significant role in sales prospecting and order processing in the near future."

Within the last 12 months Start Communications has boosted turnover by 86 per cent and net profit by 193 per cent. "We are still seeing a high uptake of

Start

UCaaS solutions while the UK makes the transition to all-IP," added Davis. "And there is rapid growth for cloud contact centre solutions within the SME market which has traditionally been out of reach for customers of this size. With customer experience being more important than ever, we see this as a strong area for future growth."

According to Scott, the customer experience is the biggest factor driving the evolution of Start Communications' market approach and customer engagement. "All businesses want to become the best they can be, and SME UCaaS and CCaaS solutions unlock many fundamentals for communication that used to only be within reach of enterprise businesses," he added.

Davis pointed out that Start Communications is pursuing a strategy of organic growth rather than customer base acquisition. "We expect that in three to five years time we would have grown by between 150 per cent and 200 per cent in terms of financial considerations and company structure," he added. "This will only be achieved by ongoing reinvestment in our technological expertise and our team. Our primary investment is in our people, upskilling and developing existing personnel as well as selecting ideally suited additional people. It's key to provide an environment that encourages people to add value irrespective of their specific roles and responsibilities. Some of the best and most valuable ideas and suggestions are tabled by these people." ■

The technology trends transforming comms

Ultra-connectivity and software-driven innovation have catalysed a comms industry revolution, ushering in a new era of high value integration and automation opportunities, writes FuseGenie Strategic Advisor Paul Cunningham.

We are in the middle of a transformative era in the communications landscape... a seismic shift towards ultra-fast connectivity coupled with the advent of ground breaking software innovations in products and services fuelled by a combination of cloud, automation and AI technologies. Integration and automation as precursors to wider AI adoption are now pivotal trends, enabling both partners and competitors to forge new revenue streams and elevate their customers' experiences. Staying competitive by seizing these opportunities hinges on recognising and adapting to the key trends, which are strategic concerns for communication service providers and their allies.

In a world increasingly shaped by the capabilities of software, the demand for software-based infrastructure and applications that seamlessly interconnect (device to device, team to team and business to business) is escalating. This software integration can expedite time-to-revenue for new products, enhance customer experiences and reduce friction and latency in business processes, making an effective integration



Paul Cunningham

Integration and automation as precursors to wider AI adoption are pivotal trends

strategy paramount for communication providers.

Optimal returns

For example, growing a fibre network business relies not just on customer and partner acquisition and retention, but on vigilant monitoring of operational efficiency to guarantee optimal returns on capacity and service investments. Whether a seasoned fibre operator or a newcomer to the field, rapid service delivery and swift

incident resolution are non-negotiable for customers and partners. Outmoded systems and disjointed IT frameworks can lead to substantial delays, compromised customer experiences and billing inaccuracies.

Interactions among wholesale fibre operators and their partners are often labour intensive and prone to error, bogged down by manual processes, creating a 'swivel chair' workplace for sales

teams as they navigate countless spreadsheets, portals and applications to even generate a basic quote. Automating these essential business processes bridges the gap with operating platforms and facilitates carrier interoperability, leading to swifter market entry and streamlined customer journeys.

Greater autonomy

With automation handling the day-to-day mundane tasks, teams can direct their focus toward more meaningful and satisfying activities, leading to heightened employee morale and greater partner and customer satisfaction. What's more, the same integration approach can empower customers and partners by granting them the autonomy to configure, quote and order offerings independently, utilising the tools they already know and love (or at least tolerate!).

An astute strategy for integration and automation places your data and processes at the core of existing systems, ensuring minimal disruption and maximum customer engagement – and will provide a solid foundation on which to build the inevitable AI-based future. ■



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Incoming Cellhire CEO set

New Cellhire CEO and former Head of Global IoT Sales at Vodafone Tony Guerion wasted no time in leveraging his experience to further develop Cellhire's value proposition and go-to-market approach in what he described as a 'perfect match' executive appointment.



Tony Guerion

Why did you take the role of Cellhire CEO?

With Cellhire's ambition to become a key player in the IoT connectivity market, one of the decisive factors in accepting this role was the chance to leverage my expertise in the IoT industry and help propel Cellhire into a prominent position within this market. Cellhire has long-established partnerships with networks I have worked with during the course of my career, being an MVNO of Orange France and an ISP for Vodafone in the UK. I felt that my experience as Head of Global IoT Sales for Vodafone was a perfect match.

How will your prior experience come into play?

My experience has also provided me with insights into the operational, strategic and customer service aspects of the telecoms industry. This is important for navigating the complexities of the market and for fostering

collaborations that improve service offerings and drive growth. The various roles I've held over the last 20 years have given me opportunities to gain experience across almost every part of the corporate world, from sales and marketing to product development and customer service. I will draw on all of this experience to help Cellhire realise its ambitious goals.

What are your first jobs to address?

Meeting the teams that are critical to Cellhire's success and learning about the different business functions across our UK, US, French and Japanese offices. As global CEO I hold responsibility for the overall business strategy. And as we approach the end of our financial year I have been thoroughly examining our different strategies and their alignment with our primary goals. This examination has involved a detailed analysis of our performance metrics,

understanding the market dynamics in each of our operational regions and assessing the effectiveness of our current strategies in promoting growth and sustaining a competitive edge. Alongside this I have been putting my experience in sales to good use and meeting some of Cellhire's key customers.

What changes do you have in mind?

As a business with private equity backing, rapid, sustainable growth is an absolute must and it is my responsibility to ensure we are heading in the right direction to deliver this. Overall, my goal is to create a demand for our product set to help ensure that we can meet the growth

As a business with private equity backing, rapid, sustainable growth is an absolute must and it is my responsibility to ensure we are heading in the right direction to deliver this

ambitions of our shareholders – and channel partners. My attention is initially focused on our IoT offering and I am currently analysing everything from our proposition and sales approach to the partner portals. In the coming weeks and months I will personally scrutinise every customer touchpoint to gain insights into our

current practices and identify areas for enhancement.

What are your immediate and longer-term priorities?

A primary focus lies in expanding our network of partnerships with channel partners in the UK. We've solidified our position as a key player in the indirect mobile sphere and the recent



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ts out strategy

integration of the Three network into our portfolio signifies a significant leap forward. With this milestone achieved there's no limit to our potential growth and impact. A second priority is to explore additional avenues for innovation and enhancement around our range of propositions, particularly within the mobile voice and data marketplace. Also, the evolution of eSIM technology holds immense promise. As the technology evolves and demand shifts the development of eSIM technology not only offers greater flexibility and convenience for users but also presents exciting opportunities. We need to be at the forefront of this.

Tell us more about Cellhire's background

Cellhire has been in operation for over three decades and has played a key role in delivering seamless connectivity and communication solutions to high profile events such as the Tokyo and London Olympics, FIFA and rugby world cup finals and the upcoming Olympic and Paralympic games in France. However, our focus has shifted to delivering resilient mobile and IoT connectivity solutions which is where the company is moving to. Cellhire is the only ISP of Vodafone, O2, EE and Three, having recently onboarded Three in the last month. To support our IoT proposition, we have established relationships with Orange France powering our MVNO as well as Manx Telecom and BT. With almost 100 employees based across the UK, France, USA and Japan, we are well-positioned to deliver our global connectivity solutions.

Where do you see Cellhire in three years time?

As a leading innovator of connectivity offerings, especially in the field of IoT. Secondly, I would like Cellhire to have seen significant accelerated growth, delivering on the expectations of our shareholders. The markets we operate in are ripe for expansion and with our strong foundation and strategy in place we are poised to capitalise on emerging opportunities.

Your biggest career achievement?

The success that I delivered at Vodafone surrounding the launch of its IoT proposition and taking it to be a significant contributor of revenue. Another positive was seeing Vodafone IoT identified as the leading IoT connectivity player in Gartner's Magic Quadrant for 10 consecutive years, driven predominantly by the role of the sales team.

In hindsight...

I'd have moved into the role of CEO for a PE-backed business sooner. The opportunities this presents enables me to call back on over 20 years worth of experience, laying the groundwork for a promising future for Cellhire.

How can the comms industry change for the better?

Through the acceleration of the convergence of IoT, AI and edge computing. This integration holds immense potential to revolutionise how businesses operate by enabling real-time data processing and decision making at the edge of networks. By seamlessly combining IoT sensors' data collection capabilities with

the analytical power of AI algorithms businesses can gain deeper insights and drive more efficient processes. Leveraging edge computing also minimises latency issues and enhances data security which are critical factors for industries such as healthcare, manufacturing and transportation. By doing so, we can unlock unprecedented innovation and efficiency across various sectors, ultimately advancing the IT and communications industry to new heights and removing dependencies from the legacies in the telco industry.

What are the keys to leadership success?

The critical success factors fall into four categories: Ensuring that the service your business is offering is best-in-class. To deliver this, the second priority is to nurture your relationship with the suppliers that are critical to your business. Thirdly, make sure your business is simple to work with. This involves streamlining processes, communication channels and customer interactions to minimise friction and maximise efficiency. And it's important to make sure that you have the right people in your organisation to achieve business objectives.

Investing in recruitment, training and talent development is essential for building a high performing team capable of driving success and adapting to the changing needs of the business environment. Moreover, creating a supportive and inclusive work atmosphere promotes employee retention and loyalty which further strengthens the foundation for long-term growth. ■

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Setting the post-2025 All-

How to create a competitive advantage in the post-2025 All-IP world is a question that requires the channel's full attention today. Here, our panel of industry experts share insights into the sources of future growth and the success factors that will define tomorrow's winners.



VICKI RISHBETH
CTO
FOCUS GROUP

The post-2025 era will magnify the buying trends that we are already seeing in the SME market. We have been selling all-IP solutions for a considerable time so can see the direction of travel. SMEs are looking to outsource their comms, their connectivity, the applications and the equipment these run over, with a best-in-breed security package to a trusted partner that can look at their specific needs and create flexible solutions with a robust service wrap. We are making sure we have the correct building blocks to create these solutions. We are also investing in our people, platforms and processes.



PETE TOMLINSON
CEO
WINDSOR TELECOM

With the accelerating convergence of software, comms and IT, we must all bring together services from multiple vendors and technology pillars into one joined-up experience for our customers. There's so much power in the services we all provide that people need help getting the best from the tools they have invested in, which in a cloud world are constantly evolving. That ability to show how tech actively contributes and makes a real difference is increasingly critical to being successful. We're investing in our customer success teams so we can advise customers on tech and on how to evolve their systems and processes, as well as ensuring great user adoption.



DAN JOBLING
PRODUCT MANAGER
– CONNECTIVITY
GAMMA

Connectivity services will become more commoditised and price-led meaning resellers will need to focus on other avenues of differentiation such as a tailored solution sell (bundling things like cyber security, firewalls, MPLS/SD-WAN) and reliability of service (maintaining bandwidth and connection quality and preventing dropouts). Meeting these future requirements will allow resellers to stay relevant in a competitive market. The key growth market in the All-IP world will be as-a-service solutions, especially in the voice area where the replacement for traditional PSTN services is replaced by a UCaaS or CCaaS offering. Resellers should ensure they have this as an option in their portfolio to bundle together with their connectivity as an all-in-one solution.



PETER JURY
INTERIM MD
ELITE GROUP

Competitive advantage will be defined by innovation and adaptability of the latest technologies, both for the customers' needs and the changing market. Growth in the all-IP world will predominantly come from the expansion in digital technologies and ecosystems specifically relating to automation, AI, cybersecurity, cloud services and analytics through a focus on market verticals. We will upskill our team, specifically in cloud services, cybersecurity and analytics, conversational AI and automation through integration.

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RICHARD SCOTT
SALES DIRECTOR
START
COMMUNICATIONS

High levels of customer service will be critical to define competitive advantage. IP products are generally more consumable and transferable than legacy services and this will drive more online-based transactions. Growth is also likely to come from continual enhancements to UCaaS offerings – more integrations, more automations and more easily adoptable CCaaS overlays. Keeping in-life solutions fresh to existing clients will ensure retention rates are high, while offering an alternative solution to businesses supported by resellers and MSPs that have not evolved. We are investing in automation and AI across all areas of the business to assist with routine operating tasks. This will allow staff to spend more time talking with customers.



PAUL HOOPER
MD UPLANDS
ONETELCO

A forward-thinking approach while embracing technology advancements will be a must. This hinges on a triple focus – people, planet and profit. IoT and 5G promise transformative change, particularly as the PSTN and ISDN switch-off compel businesses to rethink their strategies and transition to all-IP. Our long-term success is built on investment in our knowledge and solution development. As we navigate the complexities of the post-all-IP landscape, our principles remain focused on collaboration, innovation and customer satisfaction.



RYAN MARTIN
HEAD OF INDIRECT
ANSNS

As cloud, data and AI ecosystems expand MSPs and resellers will need to select the right partners. Core transformative technologies are driving innovation across multiple industries – embracing and harnessing these technologies will drive significant growth. We have been early adopters of AI and ML and are investing in skills and people. Now is the time to look beyond the 2025 switch off and fully embrace the new wave of tech. Partnerships are more important than ever and tapping into other skillsets will be transformational.



DAVE HUTTON
CHIEF GROWTH
OFFICER
FOURNET

With the post-pandemic convergence of all things IT and communications, our industry has already undergone a massive change. An all-IP world is yet another wholesale change for the telecoms industry, the biggest shake-up in 30 years, and it means major upheaval for many businesses, large and small that have yet to transition. For resellers and MSPs it provides a big opportunity, and it's one for which we've been strategically planning. We now provide overlay services such as communications and CX applications and security management, as well as the underlay network infrastructure and connectivity. In an all-IP world that will be key.



GAVIN JONES
CHANNEL PARTNERS
DIRECTOR
BT WHOLESALE

When the PSTN is retired, the resellers and MSPs that leverage emerging technologies and respond to changing customer demands will gain a competitive advantage. Seventy per cent of customers are looking to invest in mobile connectivity and 50 per cent of businesses already use Microsoft Teams every day, so it's clear that UCaaS solutions are in high demand. Growth will therefore come from offering a larger variety of connectivity and UCaaS solutions, meaning resellers and MSPs should focus on collaborating with vendors that innovate across a wide proposition range. Long-term all-IP success will depend on a supportive channel ecosystem, enabling partners to become strategic advisors to customers and guide them towards innovation.



HARRY BOWLBY
MD
SPITFIRE

Most businesses are yet to begin the switch to all-IP, despite the warnings about the disruption this could cause. With business leaders kicking the can down the road, we predict a significant logjam in Openreach as customers try to get connections set up before the deadline. Our message is the same as it was last year – act now and get this done in 2024. After the deadline, there will be a huge opportunity for businesses to strive for more growth by modernising their operations. We are already seeing businesses make the switch to all-IP and then reevaluate other areas of their communications strategy. We envisage closer integration between fixed and mobile networks and continuing growth in the IoT market.

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Brien aims to take top sp

Hot on the heels of a six million euro investment boost from Development Capital, Dublin-based IP Telecom acquired Centrecom Systems in a deal that adds capabilities in Wi-Fi, voice and IT solutions. Here, IP Telecom CEO Shena Brien shares insights into the fast expanding company's scaled up ambitions and growth story.



Shena Brien

IP Telecom is an Irish founded, owned and operated company focused on becoming the go-to service provider for voice and managed data services across all media in Ireland. In the following interview, Brien reveals insights into her strategic thinking, leadership priorities and the career experiences that shaped her as she squares up to the task of creating Ireland's premier B2B ICT provider...

What got you into ICT and when was IP Telecom established?

Following a degree in electronic engineering I started my career working as a network controller for a subsidiary of Aerlingus which had me hooked. I also developed a passion for planes. I was always on the operational and network design side of the companies

I worked for. However, due to a redundancy midway through my career I took the opportunity to work for a start up, Leap Broadband. I was a jack of all trades doing project management and support, and working with the founders gave me a taste of what it would be like to work for myself. Here I met IP Telecom co-founder and CTO Brian Chamberlain.

At the time VoIP was in its infancy and not being executed well. Brian was working on the idea of setting up a VoIP telco and we shared a common passion for excellence in customer service with a good technically sound solution. Ireland was ready for a better class of product and service delivery and IP Telecom was born in 2010, working out of Brian's kitchen with a shoestring budget that paid for the data centre.

Our industry lacks self-promotion. IT professionals deserve to be esteemed alongside the likes of doctors and lawyers

What were the big turning points?

Hiring our first people in billing, support and sales in 2012 allowed us to focus on developing the platform and fine tune the business processes that enabled us to grow. We started selling with intent when we hired our first sales agent. We found not having a sales person onboard limited our reach. Therefore we launched to be an exclusively partner-based operation, but started selling direct. Launching our platform, which is built on a distributed architecture and is highly scalable and resilient, allowed us to provide UCaaS services in 2018; and moving from

leased premises into our own offices in Parkwest the same year was another big turning point for us. Since 2018 IP Telecom has focused on development, partner support and customer acquisition in the enterprise space.

Where are you seeing the greatest success and where will future growth come from?

IP Telecom provides B2B voice and managed data solutions to medium and enterprise level customers. Having developed our own platform, this gives us the flexibility to provide scalable bespoke solutions to larger customers that can also be productised and rolled out to SMEs.

Additionally, connectivity, be it fixed or mobile to ensure best quality of voice and managed data products, is gaining great traction. Our growth in revenue has increased by double digits year-on-year and the acquisition of Centrecom, a B2B service provider in managed connectivity and existing partner of IP Telecom, marks a significant milestone. Enhanced with our integrations to CRMs such as Salesforce, Hubspot and Zoho, call recording analytics and most recently managed connectivity we feel that our future lies in developing opportunities in the large enterprise space while building partnerships



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with existing and new services providers.

What are your immediate priorities?

We are a people-first company. The people factor is key in every decision we make, whether product based or how we approach customers, staff and partners. Therefore we have employees undergoing professional training along with our apprenticeships and entry level recruitment. We will continue to invest first and foremost in our people to allow us to grow solutions in house. Also, where we see solutions being developed elsewhere we will be keen to bring them in house to augment our suite and ensure we are on the cutting edge of innovation in our sector.

Which new technology areas are on your radar screen?

The adoption and business case for AI integrations with IP Telecom products has been a trend gaining momentum in recent months. However, this is limited to internal use to increase customer satisfaction, ensuring the migration away from bots and the evolution to near human-like interactions.

We are a voice company at our core. And over the coming years we are going to see the businesses we serve employ the younger generations who are changing the landscape for voice in the way they communicate. They are more comfortable with instant messaging over voice and we will need to have a portfolio that caters to those needs. The 'connect from anywhere' culture is fast becoming ubiquitous.

What are today's leadership imperatives?

If the past five years has taught us anything it is how quickly change can come about and those who are flexible and anticipate change will survive. So ensuring business processes are robust and flexible to deal with change is key, along with sourcing and developing the right talent. It's also vital to keep our finger on the pulse of all trends in the telco sector while sifting out what will just be a flash in the pan.

What's your main industry bugbear?

The skills within the IT industry are indispensable for shaping the future of virtually every aspect of our lives yet they are too often overlooked as a career choice, particularly by women. Our industry lacks self-promotion and IT professionals deserve to be esteemed alongside the likes of doctors and lawyers.

Your role models

Richard Branson has been a hero of mine for some time. And my mother who studied hard, had an amazing family but never stopped dreaming of running her own business which she finally did in her mid-50s. She was my counsel all of her life and I was very lucky she lived to see IP Telecom.

What talent do you wish you had?

An ability to fly.

What do you fear the most?

Not learning from my mistakes.

Name three ideal dinner guests

Richard Branson, just to speak with him about his life; Queen Victoria, such

an enigmatic person and influential for a long time; and Mary Robinson, Ireland's first female president.

Tell us something about yourself we don't know

I spent seven years of my life competing in Irish dancing.

Your greatest strength and what could you work on?

I have a dogged determination to get things done, but I am not great at saying no.

Best piece of advice you have been given?

When standing on the top of a cliff over the Tully white water river, make sure you have your life jacket on and just jump in.

One example of something you've overcome

I was incredibly shy as a child but many years of amateur acting, dancing, putting myself out of my comfort zone and meeting new people have helped me to get past this.

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

My second choice was always law.

What's the biggest risk you have taken?

Walking away from a steady income to start a business.

How do you relax when not working?

Walking, travelling and reading.

Top tip for resellers

Building and maintaining a close relationship with your vendor will ensure you are armed with everything you need to know. Also, we should always be ready to adapt and open to new ways of working. ■

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Realising the full potenti

Getting to grips with network simplification and extending the transformational benefits will have a pivotal impact on a business's performance, helping to accelerate growth and adapt quickly to a fast changing market, according to Steve Kingdom, CTO Fixed Networks, Xantaro.

Xantaro was established in Germany 20 years ago and entered the UK market five years after launch on a mission to help altnets and major carriers to understand the capabilities of their networks and reach their full potential. Today, the company employs more than 170 staff, over 70 of whom are certified network experts supporting more than 300 enterprise and channel customers, between them holding more than 700 certifications.

Kingdom himself is qualified more than most in the industry. His past experience includes working on ADSL in 1997, researching the two contender technologies and collaborating across the industry to agree on its standards. "I gained a deep knowledge of industry standards and regulations, fostering strong relationships with many key leaders in the telecoms and technology sector and becoming a

global expert in broadband technology," stated Kingdom.

Not surprisingly he went on to become Director of The Broadband Forum and was its President for a year, which was a high point in a comms career that began with project managing regulation approvals for significant blue chip companies at a telecoms test lab. Now, Kingdom's experience is strongly felt across the broad spectrum of Xantaro's customer base. "Many of our customers are intrinsically linked to Project Gigabit and the roll out of FTTP in the UK, so we stay abreast of any developments, as well as new regulations such as the Telecoms Security Act, to ensure our customers' networks remain agile and within regulation constraints," he stated.

Xantaro's customers are predominantly CSPs, ISPs, altnets, carriers and data centres needing help in simplifying the complex networked world. "The



Steve Kingdom

No matter their position or role in the channel, leaders must focus on becoming trusted partners that advise, propose and deliver appropriately cost-effective solutions designed for multi-vendor environments

technical expertise among our team is so high that our technology partners, such as Nokia and Juniper as well as 20-plus others, still come to us with technical challenges that need a solution," commented Kingdom. "At the core of our business lies the ability to plug resource gaps and enable network evolution, no matter the size or scope

of our partners' businesses. "The knowledge and skills gaps that many channel organisations face is a key reason why they engage with Xantaro. There are so many decisions to be made and factors to consider that even established vendors with massive teams turn to us to validate their plans, provide proof of concepts and help them develop more

commercially viable network infrastructure solutions."

Kingdom says a big success factor in enabling these end goals is transparency and collaboration. "Building trust and credibility is essential to deliver mutually beneficial outcomes, whether your business is customer-facing or 100 per cent channel focused," he added. "No

al of networks

matter their position or role in the channel, leaders must focus on becoming trusted partners that advise, propose and deliver appropriately cost-effective solutions designed for multi-vendor environments."

Focus areas

In the UK, Xantaro focuses on supporting the growth of the altnet fibre market through flexible, scalable infrastructure hardware and services. "We've been helping them navigate market consolidation and maturity as well as the upcoming Telecoms Security Act and its impact," commented Kingdom. "Looking to the future, we're exploring 5G campus solutions in addition to how we can better support the in-life management of network infrastructure."

According to Kingdom, 5G campus (also known as mmWave) is the 'true 5G' that we are yet to experience and has the potential to revolutionise how the UK stays connected. Another focus area is the data centre market which is becoming bigger, faster and more efficient while embracing AI. "Connectivity's role in facilitating those evolutions and preventing bottlenecks is ever more important," he added. "We're working with multiple data centre operators to help them achieve their goals."

From a more holistic perspective, Xantaro's technology and services touch the Internet community en-masse, from international enterprises to individual families. "The question we're asking is how we can advance the customer experience most

effectively to enhance the accessibility, reliability and availability of Internet services for everyone," said Kingdom. "This involves scaling the network operations of our existing customers, enhancing the capabilities of consumer connectivity, such as 5G campus and MESH Wi-Fi, as well as ensuring the security and resilience of our networks."

The connectivity market is constantly evolving and the roles that Xantaro's customers play are changing just as quickly. The 2025 switch off is a case in point and a massive undertaking for the channel, and many altnets have called on Xantaro's consultative approach and expertise to navigate it effectively. "We expect this will continue far beyond 2025 as our altnet customers seek to fulfil their Project Gigabit contracts and grow their networks and customer bases," explained Kingdom. "For enterprise customers wanting to take more control over their network behaviour and security, we're giving them the knowledge and expertise to manage their international networks better, optimise performance and visibility.

"Although we support every stage of the journey – from network assessment and design to automation, implementation and management – Xantaro will continue to focus on enhancing its service portfolio with a wider range of wrap-around services. These will be designed to further enable ISPs to manage as much or as little of their network as they want, while handing off the responsibilities they cannot shoulder themselves to Xantaro." ■

Just a minute with Steve Kingdom...

Your role model: My Dad: His work ethic stays with me. I can still hear him saying 'just get the job done'.

If you weren't in ICT what would you be doing? I'd be crunching numbers as an accountant and not enjoying life anywhere near as much.

Best piece of advice you have been given: If you do something wrong don't worry about it or hide, just face it, sort out the issue and move on.

Name three ideal dinner guests: Tony Jacklin, an inspirational golfer with whom I share a loose family connection (my Dad's half-cousin). P!NK, a genuinely inspirational musician and artist – I'm a massive fan. And Charles Kuen Kao who laid the groundwork in using fibre optic cables for broadband technologies in the 1960s.

One example of something you've overcome: In 2012 I had my cruciate ligament rebuilt. It was a long process of rehabilitation and physiotherapy.

Biggest career achievement: Becoming the President of The Broadband Forum. The appointment was an affirmation of my technical understanding and insight.

Industry bugbear: For a sector that's driven by technology and innovation for everyone's gain, those who hold the power of change rarely use it, especially when it risks their influence across the market.

Your greatest strength, and what could you work on? My main strength is my knowledge and experience in telecoms. But I could work on finding the time to do admin and red tape jobs.

Your top tip: Understand how to offer customers a better experience and a wider range of integrations and functionality.

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Margin 2024 will keep channel leaders up to pace with ever-changing technologies and the race to value enrichment.

As everyone in this industry knows, the ICT market is highly competitive. If you don't stand out, you will get left behind and your exit value will decline. There are no two ways about it.

These days resellers and MSPs are rarely mediocre in the latest technology they offer clients across the public and private sector landscape, but to quote Andrew Grove, former CEO of Intel, "Success breeds complacency. Complacency breeds failure. Only the paranoid survive."

For nearly three decades, Comms Dealer's Margin events have educated, inspired and motivated channel delegates to avoid complacency, stay ahead of the curve and get an in-depth understanding of the new technologies available to them to keep customers

delighted and, essentially, accelerate those all-important margins.

At Margin 2024, to be staged at the Forest of Arden resort in the heart of the Midlands on June 20th, industry leaders will once again present an array of new opportunities to keep resellers and MSPs at the forefront of new technologies, increase their value and present new approaches to margin-making.

This is a must-attend event for channel business owners and directors looking to grow and avoid getting left behind.

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Comms Dealer events are renowned for fielding internationally acclaimed motivational speakers, and we are delighted to announce this year's Margin curtain raiser will be no exception. Charlie Cannon has proven success in guiding leaders and teams to higher levels of performance and resilience. A psychologically trained coach, Charlie's interactive approach blends stories, scientific research, and real-world successes to help individuals embrace change and perform at their best under pressure. Not to be missed!



CONFERENCE THEMES AND SPEAKERS CONFIRMED SO FAR...

Margin 2024 insight sessions will set out the most important themes influencing ICT providers' margin making potential in key markets while laying the foundations for long-term competitiveness, along with a comprehensive review of M&A activity in the comms channel.

Contributors confirmed so far include:



Nathan Marke
Chief Operating Officer
Giacom



Nikki Freeman
Business Development Director, Knight Corporate Finance



Paul Taylor
Sales Director
Voiceflex



Rob Foster
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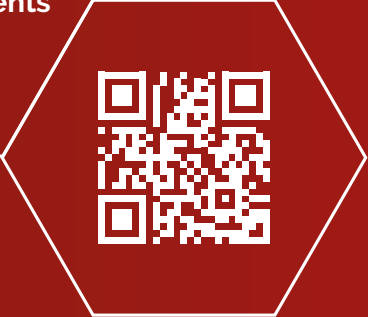




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Eke joins Logicalis



Neil Eke

LOGICALIS' operations in the UK, Ireland and Channel Islands will be spearheaded by incoming CEO Neil Eke. He brings over 20 years IT industry experience and joins from Computacenter where he spent 12 years, latterly functioning as Director, Solutions UK&I. Logicalis Group CEO Robert Bailkoski stated: "Neil's strategic acumen combined with his industry expertise and dedication to fostering talent and a culture of diversity make him the perfect choice to lead Logicalis UK&I." See the next issue for a full interview with Neil Eke.

Also on the move...

FULL fibre and fixed wireless Internet network provider Telcom has secured a brace of executive hires with the appointment of Elliott Mueller as CEO and Steve Best as Non-Executive Director. Mueller's prior experience includes executive roles at JT Global, Metronet and Tele2. Telcom Chairman Chris Baldock stated: "Elliott is a dynamic values-driven business leader with a diverse background of experiences and a track record of delivery in the telecoms sector." Meanwhile, Best's back story includes executive leadership roles (or served on the boards) with major UK telecoms companies including EE and BT. Baldock added: "Steve's experience and connections throughout the telecoms sector provide significant added value for Telcom."



Elliott Mueller

NEW Vodafone UK CEO Max Taylor takes over from Ahmed Essam who becomes CEO of European Markets and Germany Executive Chair. Taylor was previously Chief Commercial Officer, a role he assumed in March 2019. Essam commented: "Our business has made continuous strides in all areas, from the expansion of our full fibre footprint across the UK to launching propositions and improving our network."

GLOBAL data centre services firm Equinix is set for a leadership transition in late Q2 2024 when Google Cloud President Adaire Fox-Martin steps in as CEO, replacing Charles Meyers who moves to the Executive Chair position. Peter Van Camp transitions from Executive Chairman to Special Advisor to the Board. Fox-Martin, with a 25 year tech career under her belt, recently led Google Cloud's go-to-market and Google Ireland, after senior roles at SAP and Oracle. She said: "I will leverage my experience in driving business transformations and building for scale."

DARRYL Petch has joined Quickline Communications as CTO. He brings 15 years industry experience including stints in senior positions at Borderlink-Gofibre and M247 – and



Darryl Petch

recently provided tech support to Quickline working with the Project Advisory Group. Petch said: "I worked with Quickline to support the technology aspects of the bidding process for Project Gigabit. I gained some insight and new perspectives that will serve me well at Quickline as we continue to expand our networks and deliver fast and reliable broadband to rural, underserved communities across Yorkshire and Lincolnshire."

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