

**THE BIG GOAL**

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The Big Goal youth aid  
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How Creswick keeps  
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This month's movers and shakers



**Nimans shocked by NEC pull out**

LONG-term NEC distributor Nimans has confirmed that it remains business as usual following news that the vendor is pulling out of the PBX market, but MD Paul Burn is nevertheless shocked by the move.

**SPECIAL REPORT**  
NEC's withdrawal from the PBX UC market reflects a 'significant shift in demand from on-premise to cloud-based services in recent years', stated the vendor.  
NEC confirmed that the pull out applies to worldwide markets outside of Japan but did not set a deadline for withdrawal, indicating that it would happen over 'the next few years'.

NEC also confirmed that it is committed to supporting customers during the phase out period and meeting its contractual obligations.  
However, Burn (pictured) said that he is 'shocked' by the move but reassured NEC resellers that the warehouse is well stocked and support is ongoing. "No change for Nimans," he stated.  
"It's sad news as yet another household name exits the PBX market. That said, NEC's

UCaaS offering remains so the brand lives on in the communications space."  
Burn noted that the pull out is reflective of the uphill commercial challenges faced by all vendors in this space, both hardware and software.  
"Pressures from Covid, chip shortages and general market conditions are a constant challenge," he added. "NEC is not the first and I suspect won't be the last. It sure isn't as easy as it used to be."

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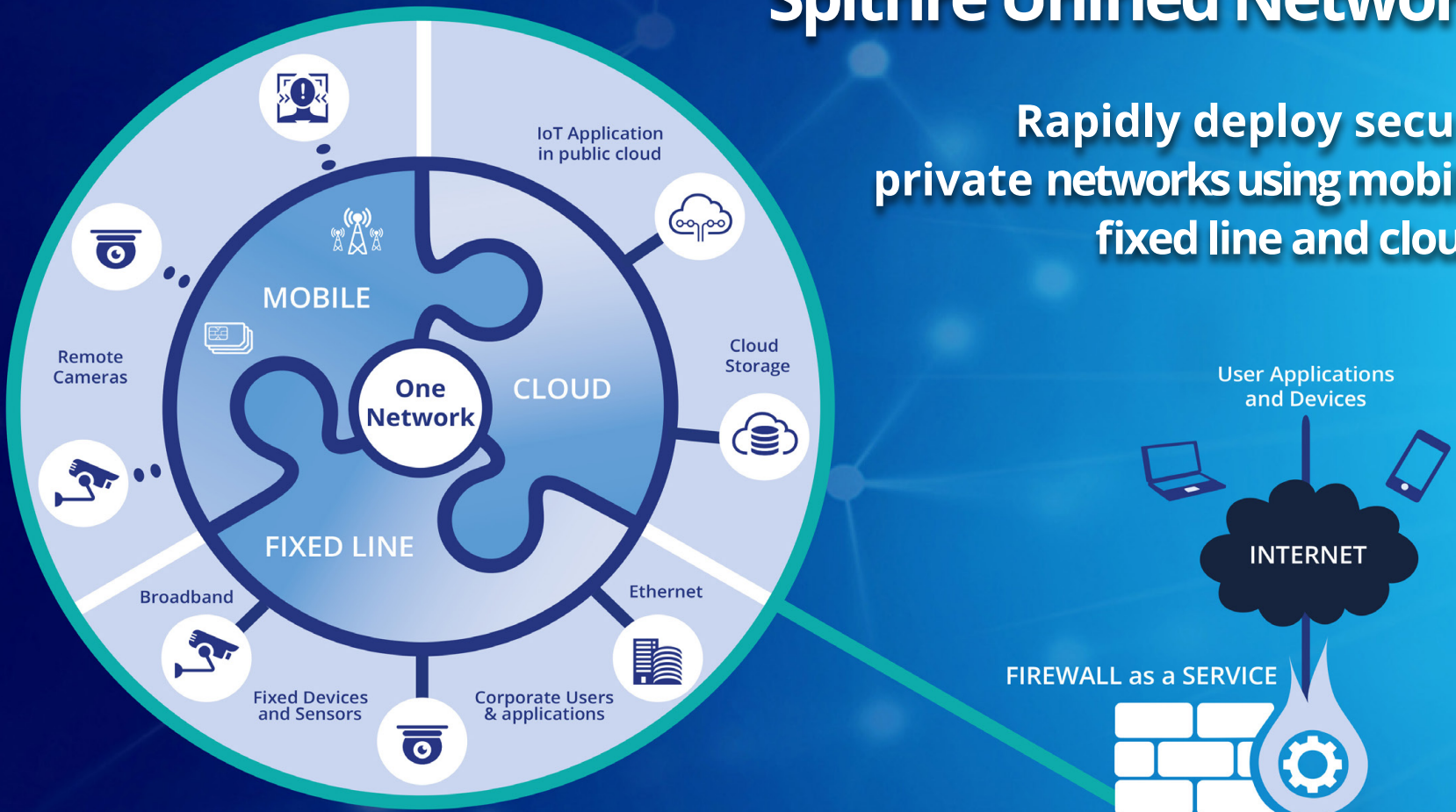
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## Welcome comment



Stuart Gilroy

LAST month I fronted up the magazine with a comment on why positive actions that could optimise how the channel works usually boil down to a case of being a lot easier said than done. With this in mind... many moons ago I worked for what was then one of the biggest

comms resellers – managing installations and engineers. I'm going back to the days of deregulation and thereafter.

Before the market opened up the company mainly rented out answer machines, chunky on site call diverters for GPs and sold a few PBXs – DeTeWes with some Vision 2000s. The business was agile, leapt on the deregulation opportunity, very quickly adapted and continued to grow fast. It was the same story when other industry changes came along like ISDN. It all seemed almost as easy to do as say. So why is it so difficult for channel firms these days to respond to new opportunities in the same energetic way and deliver comprehensive growth?

There are far more opportunities now: Technology has developed and new markets have opened up. But in terms of making the most of these opportunities the channel appears to be less effective, and the only reason I can come up with is that things might just seem too complicated and the relationships between vendor and reseller or MSP perhaps are not as tight as the days of yore as a result – so we get stuck in a rut.

True, there are far more choices in terms of markets and technologies to go after these days. Perhaps too much choice, which leads me to deduce that a targeted and focused strategy with some specialisation could be the answer to generating more growth and more focused partner relationships.

This thought was reflected in last month's Channel Forecast insight session around IoT and intelligent mobile data. The most successful resellers in this space (and going great guns) have committed to this market and specialise with concentrated support from their vendor partners (see page 18).

Stuart Gilroy, Editor

To keep up to date with the latest channel news, as it happens, visit [www.comms-dealer.com](http://www.comms-dealer.com) daily

# PE firm buys Focus Group



Ralph Gilbert and Chris Goodman

FOCUS Group has secured new investment from private equity firm Hg in a transaction that saw the exit of Bowmark which acquired a significant minority stake in 2020.

The terms of the Hg acquisition were not disclosed but a Sky News report stated that Focus Group had 'dialled up an £800m sale' netting founders Chris Goodman and Ralph Gilbert over £100m.

Focus Group was established in 2003 and serves circa 30,000 SME customers.

Hg's investment will support organic growth, M&A ambitions and product development initiatives.

Goodman said: "Hg recognises the commercial opportunity that lies ahead and the capabilities of the Focus team. It also understands that it is

the culture we've built up over the past 20 years that is the foundation of our success."

Gilbert commented: "Hg has demonstrated its ability to create value in backing companies that sell business services to SMEs.

"Hg also shows a deep understanding of how to maximise and accelerate growth using data and AI. This resonates with us.

"We also have well aligned views on the future of the ICT industry in terms of product and M&A opportunities."

Nick Jordan, Partner at Hg, noted: "The long-term trends in small business technology adoption provides Focus Group with a great opportunity to continue its growth trajectory by offering a one-stop-shop for ICT for UK SMEs."

## Editor's picks

CLOUDCLEVR has landed London-based Microsoft CSP Twisted Fish IT. The acquisition follows previous investments in NGC Networks, 4Sight Communications and Bamboo Technology Group. CloudClevr CEO Steve Harris said: "We now have a potent combination of expertise and skills to match our vision and drive. With 180 employees, run-rate revenues of more than £30m and over 2,000 customers we have a strong base for organic growth."

DONCASTER-based MSP Connectus has kicked off an acquisition spree with the purchase of Grimsby tech firm It For Growth. The deal enables Connectus, which also has offices in Salford, to extend its reach into the north east Lincolnshire region. Connectus CEO Roy Shelton stated: "As we scale we will continually explore potential acquisitions to ensure we can provide our range of fully managed services to as many businesses as possible. The MSP space is experiencing huge consolidation and we aim to complete several more transactions this year." The deal comes five months after Connectus acquired Mango Tech.

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## Editor's picks

**EVERGREEN** (a group of US-based managed IT services companies) has acquired Milton Keynes headquartered IT firm Digital Origin. The investment marks Evergreen's second acquisition in the UK. Sydney Hockett, Vice President of M&A, Evergreen, commented: "Digital Origin fits well with our strategic vision and will be an integral part of our UK expansion." Digital Origin CEO James Evans added: "We now have the rocket fuel required to take us and our clients forward as we traverse the digital agora and next leg of our evolution." Evergreen has more than 80 IT services acquisitions under its belt. Knight Corporate Finance acted as exclusive advisors to Digital Origin and the transaction. See page 12 for the full story.

**WESTCOAST'S** components portfolio has significantly expanded following its acquisition of Dorset-based distributor Spire Technology. "Spire will become the group's main components pillar with full access to Westcoast's customers, finance and tools," stated Alex Tatham, Executive Director, Westcoast.

**CORE** Technology Systems is on course to exceed its £15m revenue target this year following its acquisition of Velocity IT. The deal augments Core's capabilities in Dynamics CRM and brings additional skills in Power BI, AI, Power Apps and low/no code technologies.

**JUST** days after Focus Group secured new investment from private equity firm Hg (see page 3) the West Sussex based MSP acquired Birmingham headquartered Midland Telecom, which was established in 1987 and has technology partnerships with Microsoft, Mitel, 3CX and BT. Focus Group co-founder and Director Ralph Gilbert stated: "Our new partnership ticks all the boxes – people, presence and portfolio."

**CHESTERFIELD** headquartered Central Technology's acquisition of fellow MSP IT3000 marks a big step forward for both businesses, according to Central Technology CEO Ian Snow. IT3000 was established in 2006 as a provider of IT support and strategic consultancy services. "We aim to leverage both organisations' expertise and experience," commented Snow. IT3000 Operations Director Sam Walsh added: "Teaming up with Central Technology allows us to tap into its scale, expertise and additional resources."

# Intercity nets MS specialist



Andrew Jackson and David Keeling

INTERCITY'S acquisition of well accredited Microsoft Service Partner Centrality creates a £60m turnover business with a 325-plus headcount serving over 1,300 customers.

Bedfordshire-based Centrality brings more than 25 years Microsoft experience and its CEO David Keeling joins Intercity's board as MD of a newly established Microsoft focused division.

Intercity owner and Group CEO Andrew Jackson stated: "Centrality has grown significantly over the last five years and has become well known for its Microsoft and cloud-first approach."

Intercity CEO Charlie Blake-more said: "Centrality brings

a complementary Microsoft capability to Intercity and is a key part of our growth plan."

## People news

**CHANNEL** sales exec Roan Pratt has joined Onecom Partners as Sales Director of Indirect Channels. He moves from EnableX where he was Sales and Marketing Director since June 2022. He was previously Sales Director at Enreach which he joined in early 2021 following a stint at Gamma where he was Head of Product Sales. Gamma acquired EnableX in 2024. "Roan's experience and track record in sales leadership makes him the ideal choice to lead our sales team," said Adam Cathcart, MD, Onecom Partners. More new appointment news on page 36.

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# PXC sets out market expansion goals

PXC Chief Product & Marketing Officer Neil Wilson has set out short and long-term strategies that he says will put the firm on track to become a one-stop-shop provider of connectivity, cloud and ICT services that 'continues to challenge the status quo'.

"Our 2028 strategic objective is to become the only scale challenger in the wholesale market and the UK's primary altnet aggregator platform," he stated.



Neil Wilson

PXC's wholesale telecommunications platform currently extends to 98% nationwide coverage and is software defined from the core to the edge. And Wilson noted that PXC has so far gained 60%

wholesale broadband market share with its platform serving over 1,000 partners.

Speaking at last month's Future Connect channel event (staged at the Odeon Luxe in London's Leicester Square and attended by 350-plus partners and associates) Wilson also revealed details of PXC's near-term goals including the expansion of altnet relationships for both business and consumer, the acceleration of cloud and security products

and services while boosting the voice portfolio.

"Operational excellence will underpin our strategies as we work to deliver greater efficiencies and lay the foundations to simplify our system stacks," added Wilson.

In a product and service pipeline update Wilson flagged fresh developments in APIs, connectivity including Ethernet, fibre, security and 1Portal updates along with the general release of Zoom

and a fully brandable end user portal scheduled to launch later this year and underpinned by 1Portal.

On the PSTN shutdown planned for 2025 but currently paused, Wilson commented: "The UK is at a technological inflection point and we are working hard to design and refine the internal and industry processes that will be essential to the success of this transition while minimising disruption to customers."



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# BT drives All-IP testing

**BT has invited device manufacturers, distributors, providers and other impacted businesses to compatibility test their tech against All-IP parameters in a bid to reboot PSTN switch off planning.**

**B**T has called on the wider industry to step up following a pause to non-voluntary migrations and the Government's launch of a PSTN Charter to protect vulnerable customers. The current pause will have an impact on the timing of the overall programme, but BT's priority remains doing this safely, supporting vulnerable customers and those with additional needs in particular.

"BT was among the first telecom providers to sign the new Government Public Switched Telephone Networks Charter to help protect telecare and vulnerable customers in their migrations to digital technology," stated Steve Blackshaw, IP Migration Director – Business, BT. "We continue to work with the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT), Ofcom, industry groups and local authorities to ensure we have the right processes in place to help us identify and protect these vulnerable customers."

As a result, and along with other providers, BT Group's non-voluntary customer migrations are currently paused, but BT Business is continuing to migrate

business customers. "We are working to minimise any delays as the switch to digital landlines is a necessity given the increasing fragility of the analogue landline network," added Blackshaw.

He also pointed out that countries like Germany and Norway are 'way ahead of the UK' in the move to All-IP, while The Netherlands and Estonia have already switched off their PSTN networks. "But given the size and nuances of the UK's national network modernisation there will be some situations where the switch is more complicated," commented Blackshaw. "This includes landline-only and voice-only customers without broadband, and businesses with unique edge use cases or devices that aren't compatible with All-IP products on the market today."

Blackshaw stated that impacted businesses will need an interim solution to remain connected while they are moved off the PSTN, and that BT is developing a temporary solution to provide connectivity, but only when there is no other option available. "In the meantime we're urging businesses to register their interest to



Steve Blackshaw

**We are working to minimise any delays as the switch to digital landlines is a necessity given the increasing fragility of the analogue landline network**

test this temporary pre-digital phone line product so we can work with them to understand and test specific business use cases," added Blackshaw. "BT has a dedicated test facility at Adastral Park, our R&D centre near Ipswich. Device manufacturers, distributors and providers can come and check that their existing technology is compatible with All-IP services free of charge."

#### Under review

Responding to the 2025 switch off delay, Virgin Media told Comms Dealer in a statement, 'Last December we signed a Government-led charter and have paused all landline migrations, carried out an end-to-

end review and will make further improvements to the measures we already have in place before switchovers restart'.

This evolving situation has exposed growing tensions between network operators and local authorities. The Virgin Media statement went on to say, 'While telecoms companies like us have a crucial role to play in this switchover activity, it's essential that telecare companies and local authorities also step up and meet their responsibilities to ensure everyone receives the support they need'.

A spokesperson for the DSIT told The Telegraph that

switching off the analogue landline network is the telecoms industry's decision, with the Government having no formal role in deciding timelines.

An Openreach spokesperson told Comms Dealer: "Our role in this transition is to withdraw the analogue products that work over the PSTN, including our WLR product. Should BT Group's assessment suggest any changes to the availability of the PSTN platform then we'll consider that impact on our WLR withdrawal plans. We'll continue to play our part to make sure the switch to digital is achieved without loss of service to those most in need." ■

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# TCA formed to close skills gap

A new not-for-profit Community Interest Company has been created with a mission to close the channel's skills gap and bolster inclusivity in the sector.

Led by former EVP of Nuvias Ian Kilpatrick, the Tech Channel Ambassadors (TCA) aims to raise awareness of career opportunities across the IT channel for young people in education, those returning to employment and those looking to change career. The TCA has called on vendors, distributors, VARs, system integrators and service providers to support its efforts and make the initiative a key part of their ESG strategy while addressing an estimated 100,000 vacant job roles across the UK channel.

TCA member companies will be encouraged to invite younger staff members to act as industry ambassadors, visiting schools, delivering positive presentations of their experience and engaging with pupils to encourage them to consider the IT channel as a future career choice.

TCA says it will provide content, delivery and engagement support, and will work closely with organisations supporting LBGTQ+, the BAME community, neurodiverse, minorities, disadvantaged backgrounds, maternity leave returners and retired people who want to return to work (plus others) to ensure a structured, long-term approach.



Ian Kilpatrick

In addition to Kilpatrick the leadership committee includes Crayon MD Hayley Mooney; Distology CEO Hayley Roberts; Westcoast Executive Director Alex Tatham; Rubrik's Director of Channels and Alliances Lisa Roberts; Rebecca Monk, Chief People Officer, Softcat; and STEM champion Wendy Shore, EA to the Chief Revenue Officer, AssetLogic.

### Call to action

"We need more people in the IT industry, particularly women, and feedback is saying to get youngsters interested in the sector as early as possible – from primary school level," commented Kilpatrick. "We have had a shortage of talent for decades and there is a continual stress point with companies paying money to hire and retrain talent, followed by churn and then repeating the cycle.

"This impacts remuneration at all points in the business

chain which then negatively impacts growth and profits.

"We need a channel-wide strategy that goes down to schools and up to government and NGO levels. We have to make the message heard that our industry is an area where you can do great things. As a multi-billion-pound industry – including vendors, distributors, VARs, SIs and service providers – we have the capabilities to address the awareness and inclusiveness issues."

Kilpatrick believes there is a fundamental requirement for the channel to go beyond universities and into schools at Key Stage Three and Four, and even at Key Stage Two level – to drive awareness. "Students often self-exclude because they say they are not great at maths and science, but you don't have to excel at those subjects to get into the channel," added Kilpatrick. "There are huge career prospects around sales, marketing, customer experience, logistics and way more. They just need to know this."

The TCA intends to interact with school career advisors, LEPS, government and NGOs to grow its network and spread awareness.

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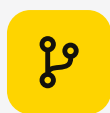
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# Gear up for an AI future

**Tomorrow's channel leaders will be centred on AI and analytics according to Emily Fallon, Regional VP, International Channel Marketing and Partner Programmes, RingCentral. Here, she provides a strong case for resellers and MSPs to focus on developing AI business strategies for both today and tomorrow.**



Emily Fallon

**R**ealising the channel's potential to harness AI is a top priority, believes Fallon, who fully expects AI and analytics capabilities to become a mainstream differentiator. "Businesses will always seek new ways to surface insights and automate processes to increase productivity, mindshare and growth, and AI and analytics provides the biggest opportunity to do that," she stated. "As a result, AI will be commonplace in the channel and in businesses generally."

It's no secret that a significant element of RingCentral's strategy centres on AI-powered solutions. Last year the company introduced RingSense, an AI platform that brings conversation intelligence to business communications and collaboration. "It is our mission to turn conversation data into powerful insights that will unlock productivity and drive business outcomes," stated

Fallon. "AI is underpinning everything we do – it's an exciting opportunity. And we'll be supporting partners at every step on the journey from onboarding and training to marketing and sales for all new products we're going to market with."

#### Harnessing insights

To underscore the point Fallon noted that the RingSense for Sales solution supports customer-centric selling with detailed insights, specific and actionable feedback and by uncovering critical moments in sales conversations. "Using these insights businesses and managers can improve their coaching and guidance, making sure each team member is performing at their best and help close deals," she added.

In a survey of resellers and MSP business leaders conducted by Comms Dealer for Comms Vision purposes last year, just two per cent identified their company as

being a specialist in contact centre solutions, which is fertile ground for AI and analytics. This is perhaps a surprising statistic given that CCaaS solutions are far easier to sell and can be applied to SMEs. "This finding did surprise me," commented Fallon. "It indicates a gap in understanding and made me question how the industry is going to market with channel partners. If partners don't feel confident when it comes to AI powered contact centre solutions, which are ripe for all businesses, especially SMEs given the macro trend of delivering gold standard customer experiences, then vendors need to do more to support their channel partners in this space."

"At times, it's easy for vendors to be laser focused on the end goal, the sale, without considering the partner and customer journey to get to that point. By reviewing those journeys, vendors will be able to understand exactly

the support they need to be giving channel partners for the best outcomes. Vendors should always be looking at ways to enhance the channel experience."

#### Drink your own champagne

Using the technology is by far the best way to experience the impact of AI and analytics on boosting productivity and enhancing collaboration, believes Fallon. "It seems obvious, but when you use your own product it makes it so much easier to get to grips with the technology and value proposition," she added. "If vendors give channel partners access to their AI and analytics products and those channel partners then give access to customers, it will make a fundamental difference to understanding and implementation."

"Partners can make data driven decisions with these tools. For example, with RingSense AI analytics in all our solutions partners

can target marketing based on analysis of aggregated customer insights or understand when a sale might be about to stall and step in with a different course of action. In my opinion, the key to future success in the channel is to become data driven by embracing AI and analytics."

#### Competitive advantage

Those channel companies most familiar with AI and analytics will be best placed to capitalise on an uptake trend that is only going in one direction. Why? Because optimising resources is front of mind for SMBs and it is vital for them to have a comprehensive understanding of customer sentiment to target their marketing, customer service and sales in the right way. So it's no surprise that demand for AI and predictive analytics is on the up given that they surface valuable personalised and data driven insights.

"We're also seeing SMBs increase adoption of AI for customer support and integrating those solutions into CRM systems for strong lead management," explained Fallon. "SMBs can be resource constrained so everything they do needs to be streamlined and efficient to ultimately help them focus on growth."

"Beyond customer support, AI integration is another big trend within SMBs where a lot can be automated. SMBs want the journey from quote to sale to be quick and easy and AI helps with that. However, to achieve maximum automation efficiencies SMBs want the plethora of AI powered products to be integrated into a single offering." ■

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# Digital Origin creates new

**Fast-growing MSPs face tough investment challenges but Milton Keynes-based Digital Origin has created a perfect fit growth context following its acquisition by US-based investor Evergreen in a deal that met all of CEO James Evans' imperatives.**

**T**he investment is Evergreen's second acquisition in the UK and enables Evans to continue with his plan for Digital Origin to become the top Connectivity as a Service provider in the UK while preserving everything the business represents. For Evans, the transaction was felicitous and a far cry from the commitments he undertook when he established the company in August 2018. "I was financially liable for its success," he stated. "I had to put money into the business and personally guarantee and underwrite all debt that we borrowed to make our acquisitions. I take risks all the time but have faith that I will always come out on top. The biggest was starting my first company in 2008. I backed myself 100 per cent."

Having built and exited a group of telco and mobile businesses in 2015 into an early consolidator, Evans saw what they were doing and, being entrepreneurial, thought he could do better. "They were focused exclusively on the enterprise,

but I've always enjoyed the SME market," stated Evans. "I knew that if we took a different approach we would do well in that sector but lacked IT expertise. So we bought our way into IT, acquiring businesses to learn about them."

Midway through 2023 Evans noted that interest rates weren't going down and it was becoming harder to borrow money. He had reached the limit of where he could take the business without bringing on institutional debt, which is expensive. He was also mindful of the domestic political landscape and that potential government changes would likely impact borrowing terms.

"We had to make sure that whatever we did Digital Origin's raison d'être and culture survived," stated Evans. "Evergreen came along with its perpetual PE model, which I'd never heard of, offering a permanent home for our business, rolling snowballs, long runways, empowerment – it was quite an elixir."



James Evans

**I take risks all the time but have faith that I will always come out on top. The biggest was starting my first company in 2008. I backed myself 100 per cent**

The deal means that Digital Origin retains its culture, mission, objectives, logo and executive team. "That's exciting," enthused Evans. "We've been liberated from concerns associated with piling more debt in and are backed by a successful international fund that empowers organisations to drive growth. My role as Chief Executive is to keep an eye on the horizon, take all of our assets and go as far as we possibly

can towards our objectives. That can only be achieved through exceptional culture, dedication and service."

#### Founding strategy

From the outset, Evans' growth model was to bring together IT MSPs, connectivity, telco and mobile companies and reshape the way services were being sold. "We were one of the first businesses to sell these elements to customers in a totally

wrapped product with one contract, one number to dial and one throat to choke," he added. "We made it easy for customers to buy."

Evans characterises his model as being effectively wholesale, enabling clients to consume products in an easy as-a-service way. "When we started this hadn't really been done," he noted. "Even today there aren't too many organisations doing it. Everything is with us and we

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# growth context

control the whole experience. That means everyone in the business is totally intertwined with the fate of our client relationships, which is a good thing."

## Accelerating trajectory

The popularity of this model, combined with Evans' acquisition and cross-sell strategy, significantly catalysed and accelerated Digital Origin's growth trajectory. "Our journey has been constant whitewater with Covid thrown in the middle," said Evans. "We made our first acquisition in October 2019, our second in July 2022 and third in March 2023. Our model was to exclusively buy, own and manage IT MSPs, helping them commercially enhance their offering. We identified the white space areas where they hadn't cross sold and looked to offer those products in."

Digital Origin started trading from scratch and within five years had reached £11.5 million turnover. This a notable achievement given the challenges faced by Evans, from raising initial finance to buying the first IT business, then successfully integrating and building on the acquired cultures, as well as creating Digital Origin's own business culture. "Not to mention getting everyone to buy in from a staff and client perspective," he added.

"We've also evolved the product and dealt with Covid challenges. When Covid hit we wondered how we were going to cope. But we did and that is an absolute credit to the quality of the team and the businesses we bought. We have the right sales capabilities and commercial acumen, as well

as the right people with integrity and care for clients."

Evans' main investment areas right now relate to Digital Origin's SOC which he wants to build out, along with people and operational development to keep pace with the company's growth. "We're seeing an increased appetite from clients wanting to embark on a digital transformation journey," he added. "So we're investing in our team and capabilities to facilitate this. We're also reviewing our products, the latest tech and whether our infrastructure is robust enough to carry us forward. After all, the infrastructure that exists to run a five million turnover business is different to a 10 or 20 million organisation. We're always trying to make sure we're ahead of the curve."

## Leadership priorities

Evans' leadership priorities are focused on a clear plan that everyone in the business understands; and he prioritises the evolution of organisational culture, ensuring it is centred on growth, creativity, motivation and fun. Evans has also introduced performance-based remuneration packages across the business. "That stems from years working as a salesman," he added. "I don't believe that sales people alone should get a commission so our senior management team have created various overlay compensation packages across all areas of the business. It works well and puts employees in control of their own destiny while removing glass ceilings. The key to leadership success is understanding that the biggest asset in your business is your team." ■

## Just a minute with James Evans...

**Role model:** My father who was very stoic and pragmatic but believed in empowering the people around him.

**What talent do you wish you had?** To play the guitar.

**If you weren't in ICT what would you be doing?** If I had my time again I would train to be a lawyer.

**Best advice you have been given:** Fortune favours the bold.

**Your main strength and what could you work on?** My strengths are endless resilience in the face of any challenge and complete motivation to finish every task. My weakness is impatience – and I could do with looking younger.

**One thing you couldn't do without in your job:** Bob Sweetlove, a good friend and our Operations Director.

**Three ideal dinner guests:** Arnold Schwarzenegger, Ranulph Fiennes and Donald Trump. I'm not political but this would make for an amazing conversation and debate.

**What do you fear the most?** Heights.

**Tell us something about yourself we don't know:** I speak fluent Spanish.

**One example of something you've overcome:** The impact of Covid in terms of the business and its landscape.

**How do you relax?** Playing sports, tennis and squash. Also socialising, travelling and eating out with my family.

**What possession could you not live without?** My coffee cup.

**What would you have done differently in hindsight?** I don't believe in regrets. You learn from everything you do.

**Top tip:** Never stop selling. Sales is the lifeblood of any organisation.

## Channel Corner with James Drake

eclipse  
wholesale



## To Switch Off or Not to Switch Off: Is It Really a Question?

Although I'm from Yorkshire and stereotypically we are recognised as a dour lot, I like to think of myself as a glass-half-full kind of chap. The question that is on my mind and one I would like to pose to the Channel Corner readers is: Are you witnessing a resistance to the WLR switch off?

Over the past few months, Eclipse Wholesale has worked tirelessly to migrate hundreds of PSTN and cooper-based broadband services over to full fibre products. This migration was carried out thoughtfully with due consideration for the end users and our Channel Partners, but with an overriding principle of getting our significant volume of analogue services down at each phase of the project.

I wasn't surprised with the challenges this project dropped in our lap, however I didn't think the majority of dialogue would be that people just didn't want to do it.

My overriding thought about the end of WLR and analogue broadband as the Managing Director of a telecoms company is mainly about the opportunity it presents to deliver customers a service in line with the demands of the 21st century. In my eyes, FTTP is better than ADSL and VOIP or SIP is better than ISDN. So why would you not want to offer this to your customers? Is it because of the complexity of the switch off or the lack of clarity with some services still using the PSTN network or is it the ever-expanding exception list?

Recently I noticed a network contact quoting the switch off had been pushed beyond 2025. The headline didn't quite match the article as the extension only referred to a limited number of consumer-based services, however again it felt like a desire for the project to fail as opposed to any actual reason to delay the switch off.

Openreach has previously stated that to retire the analogue phone network by the end of 2025 an average of 50,000 analogue lines will need to be upgraded to digital every week.

I feel like I should conclude the Channel Corner column with some simple tips which I obtained during my own WLR Switch Off project. Hopefully, these will prove helpful, so when (not if) the time is right for you to assist your customers with the Switch Off, you should be in a better position to do so.

- ✓ Identify the assets in your estate that will be affected by the Switch Off.
- ✓ Ask any engineers attending customer premises or the end users to make a list of all the devices currently plugged into the master socket and any extensions (e.g. phones, alarms, lifts, card machines, medical equipment, etc).
- ✓ Check each asset for calls, broadband markers or block terminals.
- ✓ Work with your provider on the migration paths available for each asset.
- ✓ Investigate if any alternative networks are available at the asset address.
- ✓ Use bulk migration tools if the size of your WLR estate is sizeable.

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# Insights mean business

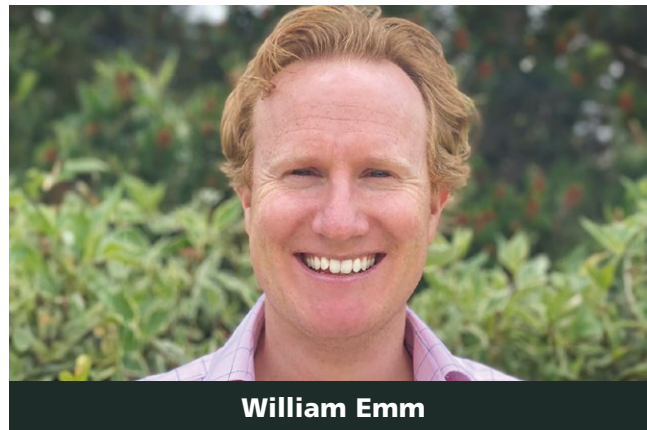
**Unleashing the full power of data through AI and analytics also unlocks high value outcomes for the channel and end users. But realising that value remains a challenge. Here, we explore pathways for resellers and MSPs to begin capitalising on the market opportunity for actionable insights.**

**R**esellers and MSPs who realise the power of customer data and how to leverage it effectively will undoubtedly secure a long-term competitive advantage. In today's dynamic business landscape, leveraging analytics and AI is imperative for staying ahead of the curve. However, many businesses struggle to grasp the full potential of these technologies, according to Matt Bodsworth, Head of Operations, Inform Billing. "To truly harness the power of analytics and AI it is essential to start integrating it into the core of operations as soon as possible," he stated. "Start by cultivating an analytics mindset within your organisation. This involves understanding how data can drive business decisions and influence strategy."

Bodsworth advises resellers to look beyond conventional

solutions and explore how data from various sources can inform decision making processes. "Whether analysing contact centre interactions or tapping into sales lead generation, every piece of data can offer valuable insights," he added. "Moreover, upstream suppliers can also benefit from AI and analytics, providing partners with enhanced experiences across different sectors. By consolidating data into a unified view businesses can identify patterns and trends, paving the way for informed decision making. Ultimately, the true value of analytics and AI lies in the experience and expertise of the provider."

Oak Innovation CEO William Emm also urges resellers to fully understand the power of analytics and says sales success can be optimised by presenting



William Emm

## It pays for resellers to get to grips with AI and analytics and how they can make a difference to their customers.

a known set of outcomes for customers. "One of our partners, Xdroid, provides AI driven speech analytics for our call recording," he said. "The company quotes a 6.3 per cent increase in sales conversion rates, a 30.5 per cent increase in the identification of at-risk customers, and a 19 second reduction in call handling per call. It pays for resellers to get to grips with the technology and how it can make a difference to their customers."

Emm also noted that AI can be implemented to help drive sales and support functions which can be resource intensive, requiring human input to process some of the most basic of requests. "By utilising AI, even in the form of a basic ChatBOT to gather customer requirements and triage support tickets,

resellers and MSPs can start to see the value that can be extended to their customer base," added Emm.

### Collaboration

Oak Innovation collaborates with AI analytics providers within the Microsoft ecosystem to bring the benefits of AI to resellers and end users of its Teams call recording. "These solutions use AI technology to scan transcripts for insights into the customer experience to better shape that experience," added Emm. "Organisations already using these products have found the ROI well worth the outlay."

Justin Hamilton-Martin, Director of Product Strategy, Enreach for Service Providers, underscored the point that customers don't buy tech – they buy into the

impact of the technology and perceived value. "If an analytics report helps visualise impacts or delivers to the bottom line, this is where customers are likely to invest," he commented. "The core motivations of most businesses are to increase sales and margin, decrease churn, increase staff and process productivity, increase staff happiness, and, in some cases, deliver compliance."

Enreach for Service Providers' strategy is to help partners improve the depth and breadth of end user analytics through a deeper use of contact interactions. "These interactions and analytics are best suited to reside in a customer CRM," he added. "However, the control levers tend to sit most comfortably within the UCaaS platform where the live contact is often bridged. With a combined CRM and UC integration, CRMs are ideally positioned to deliver the rich data most organisations need, giving them detailed insights into customer behaviour and preferences. Furthermore, once a rich data pool exists businesses of all kinds are better prepared for AI."

Analytics can also become a differentiator for channel firms, but only when the end user realises the potential and is fully accessing the information. "Most of the

**Continued on page 16**



Matt Bodsworth

**The true value of analytics and AI lies in the experience and expertise of the provider.**



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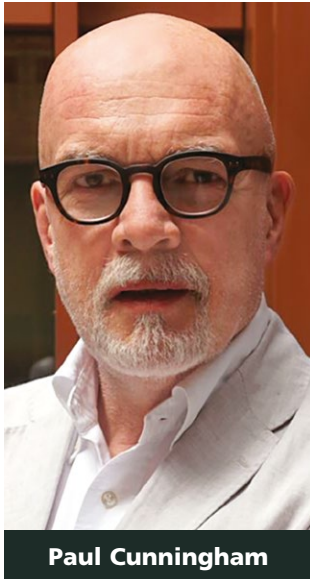
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# The next level in integrations

In a software-driven business world SaaS is reframing the way we do business in the channel. But unlocking opportunities to engage better with partners and customers, while delivering the real-time data and immediate experience they demand, requires not only the integration of technology, but also imagination, creativity and collaboration, writes FuseGenie Strategic Advisor Paul Cunningham.



Paul Cunningham

It's a whole new world in the digital economy: We have opportunities to attain scale, efficiency and connectivity in ways that were previously unimagined. Yet channel organisations struggle to reach their desired outcomes for want of an integration approach that unifies data, processes and applications across a network of companies, technologies and applications.

For example: You want to access a strategic supplier's data on pricing, quotes, orders, deliveries, returns and more, but crucially to do it inside your choice of business application, without having to learn theirs, or access yet another supplier portal, and to achieve all of this seamlessly, in real-time, without manual steps, process delays, data security issues or loss of competitive edge. The potential is huge. As the connective tissue linking channel businesses, in-app and on-platform integrations are a significant source of competitive advantage and reduced technical debt.

Broadly, there are three options a channel platform provider has to build integrations:

### 1. Open APIs

You can develop and publish open APIs which anyone can use to create integrations. A good API unquestionably makes integration possible, but only for limited users with the right developer skillsets and the time to spend. This is why APIs typically give you a much lower user adoption. In a sense, you are not much further on if you are still dependent on your partners' developers writing code.

### 2. Citizen integrators

You could direct your partners to a range of third party integration tools, but in doing so you'd be pushing users into an experience outside your domain and control. Add to this that they must invest extra time, money and resource, and these tools are not an effective solution. You are still having to learn someone

else's language – although not quite such a complex one as the API model.

### 3. Native integrations

The third and most effective approach is to build native integrations using an in-app or on-platform solution. This works because they become natural extensions of your platform. In effect, they speak the language you and your partners already use today. In short, native integrations make your platform or service more valuable, which is why it is essential to identify how partners use your integrations and then decide where to focus your efforts – engineering, support, partnership or marketing. This forges a better experience for your customers and partners.

Effective in-app and on-platform software integrations allow your teams, customers and partners to access data and create new sources of value inside the applications of their choice. There's no need to learn new paradigms or switch between systems, accelerating time to revenue while reducing training and ongoing support costs.

With digital transformation in the channel well underway, partner-centric businesses that aren't evaluating how in-app and on-platform software integrations fit into their technology strategy – nor act on the opportunities these solutions bring – will lag far behind their more proactive, foresighted and strategic counterparts.



Justin Hamilton-Martin

**Most of the industry needs to be smarter at selling the outcomes of analytics and data.**

Continued from page 14

industry needs to become smarter at selling the beneficial business outcomes of analytics and data rather than focusing on technology features," added Hamilton-Martin. "For instance, reports are potentially 50 per cent of the value of Automatic Call Distribution. Reading and reacting to these reports – such as refining the manpower timetable, revising messaging and providing additional staff training – realises that value."

Analytics and AI technology is more powerful and accessible than ever before, pointed out Tollring CEO Tony Martino. "Channel providers that have embraced analytics and AI are reaping the benefits," he observed. "Analytics is a differentiator, and AI powers it further, creating great use cases and stories that capture the imagination."

Martino sees a 'huge opportunity' within the informal contact centre space where customer-facing teams and knowledge workers across SMBs can leverage communications analytics to drive revenues through customer satisfaction, loyalty and retention. "AI-powered cloud recording extends analytics further, driving ARPU and ARR for partners and delivering conversational insights at scale for an in-depth understanding of customer experience," he added.

"Collaboration analytics delivers yet more value to SMBs through visibility of internal collaboration. And we see a big opportunity for partners as SMBs search for apps and solutions that add value to Microsoft Teams."

Resellers and MSPs using AI and analytics in their own business will maximise their own customer experience while learning how to sell with confidence, noted Martino. "It's a win-win," he added. "Channel partners need to expand their understanding of the solutions that are available in the market and build awareness of the possibilities, or risk missing opportunities. Analytics is already a differentiator. As demand increases it will become more mainstream and more accessible to SMEs."



Tony Martino

**Analytics is already a differentiator and AI powers it further, creating great use cases that capture the imagination.**

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# Why it's absolutely time

Last month's Comms Dealer Channel Forecast insight session focused on the uniquely high value IoT market and outlined strategies to help resellers and MSPs take advantage of the intelligent mobile data opportunity within their reach. Put simply, IoT is here – and now is the time to fully consider its potential to boost your business.

**Z**est4 and Pangea are at the forefront of the burgeoning IoT and intelligent mobile data market and have stepped up efforts to help partners capitalise on a 'record breaking' opportunity that the channel is well-placed to realise. Furthermore, a proactive, far-sighted approach to IoT will ensure partners stand out from the pack. "The opportunity to differentiate is significant," stated Bernie McPhillips, Sales Director, Pangea. "This market is far from being saturated and there is an opportunity for partners to talk to customers in a completely different way. Not about saving money on data SIMs, but how IoT can help to build a more resilient and more effective business."

According to Anton Le Saux, Sales Director, Zest4, channel companies would be wise to accelerate their embrace of IoT so that it plays a pivotal role in their growth strategies. "Our most successful partners buy into IoT," he stated. "Their commitment is key. But some partners fail because they ask their sales teams to treat IoT as an add-on to what they do. This does not drive intelligent mobile data deals. Our most successful partners understand the scale of the opportunity and are dedicated to realising

that growth potential with our support. The number of partners I've helped get a sale over the line has been phenomenal. Commit to IoT – it can't be an afterthought. The rewards are long-term and add significant value."

#### Profound outcomes

Resellers and MSPs who are on board with IoT are experiencing profound impacts on growth and value, noted McPhillips. "Most traditional telecoms businesses are witnessing low single digit compound annual growth," he explained. "Cloud is the exception with 15 to 20 per cent. However, the CAGR in IoT is over 26 per cent and that's accelerating. Intelligent mobile data is now truly a credible alternative to fixed line and its flexibility means IoT is pervasive across all verticals.

"We no longer need to talk about what's coming with IoT, we talk about what's here and these trends are continuing into the future. We have 17 partners with contract values worth more than £1 million. Big opportunities like these come with complexity but they are within the channel's reach."

The IoT growth figures cited by McPhillips extend far beyond fast growth rates, simultaneously generating



Anton Le Saux

**Our most successful partners understand the scale of the opportunity and are dedicated to realising that growth potential**

record breaking multiples. And he argues that it is time for the channel to wake up to these commercial realities. "Traditionally, telecoms firms are valued at six to eight times EBITDA (multiplier)," he added. "Perhaps 10

times for larger resellers. But there's many examples of businesses in the IoT sector being valued at over 20 times EBITDA. From a growth and valuation point view there are compelling reasons to get into this market."

The ongoing headlong growth of intelligent mobile data solutions is being fuelled by a wide range of drivers; and it's key to recognise how IoT technology can deliver data-driven insights that are fit for purpose across a

# to create a plan for IoT

broad scope of use cases in many settings – as well as driving resilience. “The level of resilience offered by IoT technology has increased significantly,” said Le Saux. “Multi-network SIMs provide access to four networks in the UK. But there is still, somewhere, a single point of failure. When using IoT technology we can put up to eight users on one SIM. The further away we take away that single point of failure the more critical connectivity can be, and the easier it is to sell a solution to an end user who stands to lose money by losing connectivity.”

## Transformational

IoT applications can prove to be transformational in a number of areas, delivering pervasive benefits and the market is becoming more receptive. “More people are realising that connecting things creates greater efficiencies,” added Le Saux. “But they’re not asking for IoT, most of the marketplace is around data SIMs and smart devices. A major customer driver is real-time information from devices and operating systems which enables them to manage their business more efficiently. Moreover, the number of security companies launching completely wireless solutions is also growing. We saw many wins in the security sector last year.”

Other big trends contributing to the growth in demand for IoT is the rise of eSIMs and iSIMs. “Within five years they will make up 70 per cent of the market,” stated McPhillips. “Various verticals are driving that expectation, including smart cities and autonomous cars. There’s far more pull from the market and we’re



Bernie McPhillips

## There is a responsibility for the channel to grasp these solutions and make sure end users are aware that they exist

working on bringing these technologies to partners.”

Le Saux supported this observation with a similar emphasis. “End users have more knowledge about what they want from a connectivity solution,” he stated. “A year to 18 months ago we were having to propose a

multi-network SIM. Today, 95 per cent of customers understand what they are and are asking for them. For partners who do not have IoT as their core business, that helps massively.”

To further boost IoT’s expanded use it is important for resellers and MSPs

to raise the intelligent mobile data conversation to a broader and deeper context, otherwise end user organisations won’t fully grasp the nature of the positive impacts of IoT, and partners won’t capitalise on the growth opportunities within their reach.

“If we avoid selling the term ‘IoT’ and start selling intelligent connectivity partners will get along a lot better,” commented Le Saux. “IoT means nothing to end users, but they do understand that intelligent connectivity is not just about connecting devices and generates relevant information that enables them to achieve their goals more efficiently. Customers can see data flows from machines and devices in real-

time. That has to be a USP for the partner and a reason to buy for the end user. But it’s about articulating these solutions to customers.”

## No brainer

Customers are becoming an irresistible force as they seek solutions for their business problems, and the channel is starting to understand that alternative solutions like IoT with an expected RoI are becoming a ‘no brainer’, says McPhillips. “Intelligent mobile data solutions are more versatile, more resilient, ultra-secure and commercially flexible. Not to mention the control and global mobility they can add to a business,” he added. “Therefore customers are embracing the technology but only when it is presented to them in a way that clearly illustrates these positive outcomes.

“There is a responsibility for the channel to grasp these solutions and make sure end users are aware that they exist. I urge resellers and MSPs to focus on IoT market potential, target sales people and give intelligent mobile data the business development treatment it deserves.”

Those resellers and MSPs who embrace IoT also stand to reshape the intelligent mobile data competitive landscape, creating the potential for new market leaders. “We need to help partners become world leading providers of intelligent connectivity services,” said McPhillips. “That’s where the scalability has come from, by making partners more independent in their pursuit of record breaking multiples that add huge value to their business. This opportunity is unprecedented and real.” ■

## IoT dos and don’ts

### Dos...

- Do recognise IoT’s scale of growth and high value
- Do remember that customers are more receptive to IoT
- Do fully articulate the benefits of IoT to customers
- Do commit to IoT rather than treat it as an add-on
- Do partner with a channel focused IoT specialist

### Don’ts...

- Don’t think IoT is just mobile, it’s far more than that
- Don’t underestimate the growth potential of IoT
- Don’t talk ‘IoT’ to end users, they don’t know what it is
- Don’t face playing catch-up in this fast growing market
- Don’t dilly dally. Embrace intelligent mobile data today

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# A strategy defined by purp

**GigaBritain's rapid rate of growth is attributable to a market impact-driven strategy centred on partner enablement, collaboration, raising the service level bar and a clear understanding of its founding vision, according to Head of Wholesale and Partners Will Goodall.**



Will Goodall

**G**igaBritain is the wholesale brand of Telcom Group and was launched in July 2023 to extend the benefits of Telcom's fibre and wireless networks in key cities to the channel. Notably, Telcom's acquisition of Luminet created one of the largest fixed and wireless network providers in the UK, and its business leaders have a clear understanding of their overarching purpose, the influence the company can wield in the market and the positive impacts it can make in the channel and beyond through sheer scale and visionary strategy, according to Goodall.

"We can offer channel partners access to 10Gbps connectivity across London, Manchester, Birmingham, Leeds, Liverpool and soon Cardiff using fibre and wireless dedicated Internet," commented Goodall. "For nationwide coverage we've forged strategic relationships with national carriers."

Since launch GigaBritain has built a 200-plus partner community which continues to expand. The channel contributes significantly to group revenues which have now surpassed £20 million per annum. "The growth plan for GigaBritain is to double revenue over the next 12 months," commented Goodall. "The group has grown to over 200 staff which includes in-house civil, infrastructure and network engineers."

**Positive actions**

Goodall attributes this growth to taking positive action on feedback from partners. Ongoing investment in GigaBritain's partner portal, marketing support and internal systems is also paying dividends. "The fundamental core to everything we do is based on partner feedback," said Goodall. "We are always talking to partners to understand the potential products they would like to see and how they can be supported. For example,

## Collaboration is key to success in this dynamic sector and we are building a like-minded community that is always looking to deliver for clients

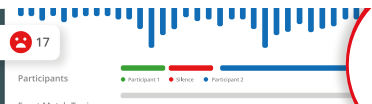
I am interested in security and leveraging our in-house engineering resource to support partners in providing a comprehensive solution. Feedback tells us that this will greatly reduce the impact of managing multiple suppliers for partners and drive significant value by enabling them to win more business."

GigaBritain brings together industry knowledge

and experience with exacting standards, and according to Goodall this combination creates value for all stakeholders in an environment where demand is growing for connectivity that can be delivered quickly with high SLAs. In this context, Goodall highlighted three key areas of growth, including notable partner successes within its 300-plus Telcom Preconnect

buildings where it has built its own infrastructure. This enables partners to provide connectivity to tenants within five working days.

He also expects to see ongoing demand from key economic cities as investment increases and populations continue to grow, driving more requirements. Managed services are also ripe for expansion, providing more





# purpose and impact

than just connectivity and opening the door to areas of the market that partners may not have previously been able to serve. "While as a wholesale provider we have partners working in many verticals we are especially focused on large multi-business units where we can deploy our Preconnect product," added Goodall.

## Service elevation

As we have seen, GigaBritain places a high value on how it positively impacts the channel and wider connectivity landscape, and aims to create a service model that is fit for purpose. "We have an opportunity to overturn end user assumptions about needing to accept poor service levels from the industry," commented Goodall. "Speaking to customers and partners there is a general consensus that in most cases it's expected that updates will not happen, delays are inevitable and there is no accountability from the supplier. Our biggest opportunity is to push against this, focus on excellence and capitalise on the current partner experience by delivering a service that is grounded in support and business growth."

GigaBritain's positive impact approach prioritises collaboration and to build on the potential of its owned fibre network it has forged relationships with key third party providers to deliver a resilient end-to-end network for partners, irrespective of the last mile provider, ensuring consistency and reliability.

"Collaboration is key to success in this dynamic sector and we are building a like-minded community that is

always looking to deliver for clients," commented Goodall. "The market is constantly changing and despite market consolidation there will remain a growing need for all businesses, even competitors, to be open to collaborate together. The more we can do that in the channel the more benefit we can offer partners who in turn can support British businesses."

GigaBritain has also integrated broader impacts into its strategy, aiming to drive down damaging market trends and drive up the UK's global digital ranking. "There appears to be movement in the market towards connections at any cost, regardless of the benefit to the connectivity provider which leads to longer lead times and a disjointed partner experience," said Goodall.

"We are aiming to take real ownership in the market through providing a reliable, fast quality service that is beneficial for everyone. This ties into our wider business goal to revolutionise the overall experience and increase service levels within the industry, helping to address the fact that Britain currently ranks 34th in global Internet speed and 18th in Europe."

Against the backdrop of a fast evolving comms landscape Goodall has a clear view of the short and long-term impacts he hopes GigaBritain will catalyse, ultimately transforming the business connectivity market in the channel. "In wholesale connectivity we need to remove the race to the bottom, drive industry standards and accountability, and make it a lot more accessible for all," he said. ■

## Just a minute with Will Goodall...

**Role model:** My dad. His work ethic inspires me to provide a great future for my family.

**What talent do you wish you had?** To be a professional footballer.

**Best advice you have been given:** All you can do is your best, no more, no less.

**Your main strength and what could you work on?** My strengths are relationship building and random thinking – I try not to follow the crowd. But I need to work on imposter syndrome. I often have to steel myself in certain environments to drive me out of my comfort zone and feel equal with industry leaders.

**One thing you couldn't do without in your job:** A sense of humour.

**Three ideal dinner guests:** Tupac Shakur, I loved his music growing up and became interested in his views on equality expressed through poetry and eloquent arguments; Winston Churchill for insights into his ability to drive a nation in times of huge difficulty; and Andy Booth, a key player for my beloved Huddersfield Town FC.

**One example of something you've overcome:** In 2021 I had emergency surgery due to a ruptured bowel and sepsis and was hours away from passing away. Coming back from that and pushing forwards has given me a resilience that I do not believe can be broken.

**The biggest risk you have taken:** Establishing GigaBritain with Telcom from a standing start. I believe there is a better way of working in the channel with a greater focus on relationships and accountability and I'm determined to prove just that.

**Top tip:** Focus on your key strengths as a business and lean into your supplier base.

## The LAYERS of SUCCESS

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## Are you in need of a Value-Added Vendor?

In the quest to gain a competitive edge, the true key lies in successfully utilising software and partnering with a vendor that brings real value to your business. With software implementation failures happening between 18-69% of the time [Harvard Business Review], and only 40% of companies are reaching the ideal 90% adoption rate [G2 Learn Hub], it's clear a new approach is needed.



Michelle Livingstone  
CEO, Layer Systems

Perhaps you've experienced some of these common business headaches that we often hear:

**Substandard support:** You were promised world-class support, but when you need assistance, you're left waiting days for a response from someone who struggles with industry terminology and requirements.

**Inadequate training:** You're handed hours of videos or thousands of words to plough through, leaving you feeling overwhelmed and ill-prepared.

**Feeling stuck:** You've invested considerable time and money into your current system, but it's not delivering. Yet, you feel like you must stick with it to save money in the short term, not realising just how much it's costing you in the long term.

This is where a Value-Added Vendor comes into play. In today's climate, it's not enough for a vendor to simply offer a good product. They must add tangible value to your business and be a partner, just as you are as a VAR or MSP. They should be invested in your success and growth.

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supporting you to increase revenue and reduce customer churn. With our in-house experts who created the software, you don't need pricey third-party consultants. We believe in garbage in, garbage out so our Project team will support you to migrate clean and accurate data from all your sources. Our hands-on, tailored training drives user adoption and productivity. And our community-driven approach ensures we shape our roadmap based directly on customer feedback and what the channel needs.

Just last year, a communications leader of over 25 years appointed us to address fragmented data and automate manual processes by replacing an underutilised CRM. After adopting The Layer and benefitting from our managed onboarding, they streamlined their renewal process, freeing account managers for strategic efforts and customer relationships, enabling renewals of 70% of their IT base in record time.

In an era where every penny counts, making the right choice for your software needs is crucial. We're committed to adding tangible value and becoming an indispensable ally in the ICT channel. Book a demo today to explore how we can help address your business pains: [www.thelayer.com](http://www.thelayer.com)

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# Aspire chief raises the am

**Aspire Technology Solutions CEO Chris Fraser outlines plans to hit £50 million revenue based on a set of strategic principles that remain unchanged from the day the MSP was established.**

**A**spire Technology Solutions began life in 2006 as an MSP on a mission to take the hassle out of IT support for customers. Its long-term and unwavering trajectory was set by Fraser who relishes the challenge of problem solving and making things work well. "I was frustrated that IT solutions always seemed to make people groan and technology was often deemed to be a necessary evil," he stated. "I founded Aspire because I wanted to change that, to say yes to customers, to help people find the best solutions and to ensure they got the right advice."

Fraser was 26 at the time and established the company alongside Nigel Begg who also wanted to develop a truly customer-centric organisation. Today, Aspire is a managed service provider specialising in cybersecurity, cloud, connectivity and unified communications. It serves nearly 2,000 customers, employs circa 280 people (with over 80 colleagues added during the past year) and is headquartered in Gateshead with additional

offices in Glasgow, London, Leeds and Stockton-on-Tees. "Our progression over time led us to become an ISP and a cloud provider, marked by a partnership with VMware and investments in our top-tier self-service hybrid cloud platform," said Fraser. "We have also launched an in-house SOC that delivers round-the-clock managed security services leveraging security tools through our partnership with CrowdStrike."

**Revenue growth**

Published accounts for financial year ending February 2023 indicate a rise in turnover to £32.2 million, representing 30 per cent growth during the last three years. "We are just getting started," stated Fraser. "In 2015 our turnover was around £8 million and we set a target to reach £20 million by 2020. We achieved this one year early and have ambitious plans to reach £50 million turnover by 2027."

In March 2022 Aspire secured a significant minority investment from LDC in a transaction that valued the business at £85 million. Its M&A journey began in



Chris Fraser

**We're helping companies shift from reactive to proactive technology, making sure they stay secure and future-ready**

December 2023 with the acquisition of Glasgow-based cloud and IT MSP Cloud Cover IT. "This strategic move expanded our geographic reach into southern and central Scotland, aligning with our vision for broader UK expansion and enhancing our portfolio of technology solutions," added Fraser. "With LDC's support and the recent appointment of Tom Howard as Chief Financial Officer we anticipate driving further growth through strategic acquisitions, broadening our geography and capabilities."

Aspire works with businesses from all sectors and has an approximate 80/20 split

between private and public sector customers across the UK, Ireland, continental Europe and Australia. In the public sector Aspire serves NHS trusts, local councils and education establishments. Private sector clients include Lookers and Barbour. "Over 80 per cent of our business comes from recurring sources," added Fraser. "We moved with the market and positioned ourselves to capitalise on technology diversification, enhancing the value proposition for our customers."

Cybersecurity solutions have emerged as a key area of growth, noted Fraser. "Stats show that around

40 per cent of businesses have experienced a security breach in the past year and that number is expected to rise," he added. "We're helping companies shift from reactive to proactive technology, making sure they stay secure and future-ready. Our security department comprises a dedicated group of specialists that ensure the effectiveness of our security solutions and handle critical tasks such as round-the-clock monitoring, incident response and security consulting."

According to Fraser, Aspire's offering extends beyond just service provision. "We offer personalised guidance to our customers and measure



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# Ambition bar Turn ND inputs into outcomes

our performance using the Net Promoter Score global measure," he explained. "Our score averages +83 which is deemed 'world-class' and more than double the average score for the telecommunications industry. I want Aspire to be known as a customer-first partner which delivers technology solutions that drive customers forward. Ultimately, that's what we are all about."

To further advance the company's mission Aspire is embarking on a customer-first AI strategy. The criticality of AI as a catalyst for operational excellence is also at the forefront of Fraser's mind. "AI's importance is undeniable and it's swiftly becoming a cornerstone in transforming our operations," he added. "Utilising Azure's secure environment we're tapping into AI's power to streamline processes and elevate customer experiences. Through AI-driven analysis of customer queries we can swiftly identify needs and take proactive actions. This not only saves time but also allows us to redirect administrative efforts towards more customer-centric activities that provide value."

"As we continue to integrate AI across the business we expect even greater efficiencies and advancements for customers. But while AI can automate tasks and offer insights human expertise is essential in guiding its application for the best outcomes. For us, AI isn't about automation alone, it's about smart augmentation. We're integrating AI to empower our teams, providing them with insights and support to deliver superior results for our customers." ■

## Just a minute with Chris Fraser...

**Your role models:** My role models come from colleagues within Aspire and truly partnering with our customers.

**Best advice you have been given:** When I was considering taking the plunge with Aspire my uncle took me aside and said 'just do it'. I've been lucky to have a supportive family and that may have given me the push I needed.

**What talent do you wish you had?** The focus and skill demonstrated by top Formula 1 drivers is incredible. I'd love to be able to race a few laps with them.

**Three ideal dinner guests:** Sir Alex Ferguson, I'd love to talk to him about the siege mentality he created and that desire to win at all costs. Ross Brawn, a pure technical expert in Formula 1 who achieves his goals with an obsessive attention to detail. And Queen Elizabeth II, she would have some fascinating stories, especially about what she really thought about certain Prime Ministers.

**What tech is most critical to your job?** Touchscreens in our office. They switch from whiteboard to computer screen to video conference. Getting the team together in a room and collaborating on how to solve an issue or developing new solutions is invaluable.

**What possession could you not live without?** I live within walking distance of our office and don't have a car, so it's my airpods. I learn so much from podcasts and walking is the main chance I get to catch up on them.

**How do you relax?** I'm a keen poker player. I love the combination of problem solving and reading people to help make the best decision. Every hand is unique and I thrive in that environment.

## Striking the right balance between taking positive actions to promote neuro-inclusivity and achieving real world outcomes is critical to neurodiversity success, writes ND champion and Train to Win CEO Julie Mills.

**M**ore comms industry companies than ever marked this year's Neurodiversity Celebration Week in March. Events such as this, and the Neurodiversity in Business conference I attended in April, are often a first step for businesses to get to grips with ND, providing a catalyst for uniting staff around the issue and helping to spread awareness. These foundations can then be built upon to create and support neuro-inclusive workplaces that deliver a win-win for employers and employees.

While I can't put a number on how many comms industry professionals are now ND-aware, it's up into the thousands and a very encouraging picture for those who care about addressing workplace inequality and capitalising on all talent.

Further evidence of blossoming ND awareness came with the wonderful news of TalkTalk/PXC's fundraising effort for Ambitious About Autism in March, generating £366k and bringing their total raised for the charity to almost £5 million. Not only does this money go towards a wonderful cause (including work opportunities and



Julie Mills

support for those up to the age of 25), it raises the profile of autism and helps remove some of the stigma.

### True measure

But despite the positive impact of much-needed fundraising there remains no true measure of practical progress made around investments into neuro-inclusion. That got me thinking about the metrics we could use as an industry to benchmark where we are and how much further we need to go to make a meaningful and compelling assessment of what's happening at the coalface.

Investments in DEI programmes for example, like charitable giving, are an input rather than an outcome. To achieve solid neuro-inclusive outcomes I see self-examination of employment rates as the most important success factor. Not only for

individuals but for businesses as a whole. Striking the right balance between investments in ND initiatives and positive neuro-inclusive outcomes has to be the goal. It's the logical next step in embracing awareness of neurodiversity and the opportunities it presents.

With ND awareness on the up it's time to consider your own neuro-inclusive workplace outcomes. How many people with ND traits have you interviewed, recruited, trained, developed, promoted and retained in the last year? How does this compare with other industries? I doubt we will ever see the full picture, but it's easy for individual businesses to measure how far they are moving forward with true purpose by matching their ND inputs with desired outcomes, and then set modest goals to improve performance. ■

# St George's Park awaits!

The Big Goal regional football tournaments across the UK united the channel while helping to change young lives for the better.



Teams from Focus Group, Elite Group and BDR Group celebrated victories in last month's regional tournaments of The Big Goal, staged respectively at the training hubs of Brentford FC, Sunderland AFC and Nottingham Forest FC.

Gamma (South), Vorboss, inTEC 2, Focus Group United (South), Daisy Corporate Services 1, Sky Business North, Elite Group FC, Platform X Communications FC (North), Virgin Media Hotspur, Wavenet, Focus Group United (Midlands) and BDR Group.

Focus Group United (South) won the Southern Tournament with a narrow 1-0 win over Gamma. Hero of the tournament went to Focus Group's Chris Quinn, who dislocated his wrist badly in the final but ignored the pain to join his colleagues on the winner's podium (see right). "The man's a legend!" said Focus Group CEO Ralph Gilbert.

Fees paid by The Big Goal competing teams will fund Street Soccer Foundation Academies in their area, which help young homeless and disadvantaged young people turn their lives around.

Keith Mabbutt, CEO of the Street Soccer Foundation commented: "We've had 44 teams from across the country take part with all three of the regionals played out in such a great fashion. It's been a true coming together that has really brought to life our #IndustryUnited approach with the campaign.

In a high scoring and dramatic final, Elite Group overcame Platform X Communications FC (North) 5-4 to win the Northern tournament, securing the cup with the last kick of the game.

Finally, BDR Group triumphed in the Midlands section beating Wavenet 1-0 in another close final.

Based on the regional results, the following 12 teams will be competing at The Big Goal finals tournament to be staged at The Sir Alf Ramsey indoor football arena at St George's Park, where the England team trains, on November 1st. Games will be played on the FIFA pro-certified pitch including a 200-person viewing gallery. Big congratulations to all!

"A huge thank you to our headline sponsors Giacom, our media partner Comms Dealer, plus Sky Business Wholesale and Sky Sports too. Their collective brilliant support of The Big Goal has been humbling. Roll on the nationals!"



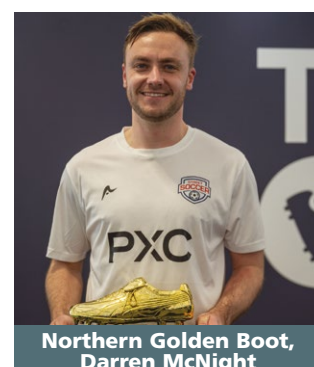
Midlands Golden Boot, Wesley Mac



Northern winners, Elite Group



Southern winners, Focus Group



Northern Golden Boot, Darren McNight



Southern Golden Boot, Rob Jones



Midlands winners, BDR Group

You can see all the pictures from the regional tournaments via the following links:

Southern Tournament:  
<https://www.playbook.com/s/street-soccer-foundation/oY45Nmm84je6YFVCe6KoHF4>

Northern Tournament:  
<https://www.playbook.com/s/street-soccer-foundation/bV6T57Jp4KsjL5dTxzCZFoW>

Midlands Tournament:  
<https://www.playbook.com/s/street-soccer-foundation/WD3BxZeNQehsspUovXy2b9JA>

WINNERS	SOUTHERN	NORTHERN	MIDLANDS
Group A	Gamma (South)	Daisy Corporate Services 1	Virgin Wholesale Hotspur
Group B	Vorboss	Elite Group FC	Focus Group United (Midlands)
Group C	inTEC 2		Wavenet
Group D	Focus Group United (South)		BDR Group
Champions	Focus Group United (South)	Elite Group FC	BDR Group
Fair Play Award	Platform X Communications FC (North)	Giacommanders	BDR Group
Golden Boot	Rob Jones (Focus Group)	Darren McNight (Platform X Communications FC (North))	Westley Mac (BDR Group)

Want to get involved and take part in The Big Goal? Contact [hello@thebiggoal.co.uk](mailto:hello@thebiggoal.co.uk)



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# CHANNEL CHAMPIONS

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**May 15th**

# Last chance to reward your teams

Your tremendous, tenacious, talented teams should be rewarded for the hard work they've carried out for your business and there's still a chance to recognise their achievements by entering the popular and prestigious Channel Champions Awards!

**N**ow's the time to recognise those achievements and hard work by entering your teams into the popular and prestigious Channel Champions Awards process.

The Channel Champions Awards delivers awards across all functions of channel businesses including:

- Sales & Account Management
- Marketing
- Tech Support and Engineering
- People & Culture
- Billing & Finance
- Executive Leadership

There are also special awards for teams that have set up quality apprentice schemes, run amazing business events and raised funds for good causes.

Channel Champions offers a unique promotional opportunity to associate your organisation with high achievers. And we have made entering simple and easy to do. Just register on the awards website [www.channel-champions.com](http://www.channel-champions.com), which will enable you to view all the categories and download the entry forms. The entry deadline is May 15th, 2024, so there's plenty of time to enter. If you are shortlisted, you will then join other finalists who will gather at a celebratory summer garden party with the awards ceremony staged in an open marquee followed by networking in the glorious surroundings of London's most elegant Royal Park.

We are extremely grateful to Giacom for once again being the headline sponsor for Channel



Terry O'Brien

Champions 2024. Terry O'Brien CEO of Giacom, commented. "We are delighted to play our part in paying tribute to the amazing professionals in our fantastic industry. Staging the Channel Champions in the open air with a festival atmosphere makes this an event to remember.

"Over the years, we've been fortunate to win multiple Channel Champions awards, so we have experienced first-hand the positive impact it has on a team. Entering the Awards can be a huge incentive for your teams as they want to win and celebrate their accomplishments.

Event sponsors already lined up for the event are Giacom, Allpoints Fibre, BT Wholesale, Gamma, PXC & Voiceflex.

To enter go to [www.channel-champions.com](http://www.channel-champions.com)



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# Drive your business growth at Margin 2024

Discover the latest industry and customer trends and identify a vast range of solutions to help you maximise your competitive advantage.

**A**s 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.

Register now to reserve your place at <https://www.margin.events>



## CANNON READY TO FIRE UP MARGIN DELEGATES

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**  
Channel Sales Director  
Zest 4



**Anton Le Saux**  
Head of IoT Business  
Zest 4



**Paul Gibbs**  
Head of Sales  
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# How Creswick keeps Vor

**Vorboss CEO and professional car racer Tim Creswick relishes life in the fast lane, and his winning formula strikes a strategic balance between an all-out drive to lead from the front and the problem solving attributes of a trackside engineer.**

**V**orboss didn't start life with a destination in mind, nor a business plan. It was conceived through the methodical mindset of a conscientious employee, rather than an overt entrepreneurial quest – but Creswick's foresight, have-a-go attitude and problem solving adaptability have always been telling factors. "My career started in the same way as most dedicated people coming out of university, with a genuine desire to add value and be paid for what I'm good at," stated Creswick. "Nearly 20 years on a lot's changed, but the founding ethos is similar. Today, we have close to 400 people focused on what our customers need and the value we add."

Creswick's systematic approach to building customer value can be traced back to the practical nature of his skills as an engineer, a computer scientist and a software developer. "I've always been technically minded," he added. "The fact that I'm now in the telecoms industry is coincidental rather than planned. I'm an engineer and problem solver at heart and the ICT industry happens to be the best place to be that."

But it would be a big mistake to assume that Creswick's approach to business speaks of a man



Tim Creswick

**I believe in providing abundant capacity. You don't question if you'll have enough water or electricity coming into your building. Data should be no different**

who is risk averse. On the contrary, he is a professional racing driver, competing in the GT World Challenge Europe with Walkenhorst Motorsport, driving the Aston Martin Vantage GT3.

Therefore his will to win is perhaps greater than the fastest moving entrepreneur – and he likes to be in pole position. Creswick's scientific approach to managing risk, which is more akin to being

in the slow lane, is also a red herring to his pioneering energy and willingness to embrace uncertainty. "Any journey towards being successful is littered with all sorts of things that didn't

work out," he added. "We've always been advocates of experimentation."

With Creswick in the driving seat, Vorboss will no doubt continue to gain an advantage based on striking the right balance between pursuing strategies with known outcomes and those with risk factors. His career pathway also requires close attention if we are to unravel whether Creswick's journey into comms was really a chance happening or down to following his nose for solving problems.

Creswick studied engineering and computer science at Oxford and went on to build software in-house at a large law firm. "That taught me a lot and the experience encouraged me to set up my own company," he added. "I incorporated Vorboss in January 2006 and pitched building software to small businesses in my local area of Exeter. I rented a tiny one person office, just to give me somewhere to go, and hired my first employee six months later.

"We then became a cloud company, yet didn't call it cloud back then. But it was software delivered to a server in a data centre, rather than on-prem. Bearing in mind Amazon didn't open its first UK data centre until 2017, we were ahead of the curve. During the 2009 financial

Fast-forward to greatness

PXC



# Vorboss in pole position

crisis I decided to stop building software and focus on the hosting business, which was more profitable. We then relocated to London and moved down the stack from software to hosting through to connectivity. Always reacting to solve the problems we found with each area that we focused on."

A case in point is one of Vorboss' biggest managed cloud hosting customers, DueDil, which used a petabyte-scale Hadoop cluster that Vorboss ran on a central London data centre. "One of the worst bottlenecks was the cable between their office and the data centre a mile away," commented Creswick. "Solving that problem was the catalyst for us becoming a connectivity provider."

## Door opener

Another one of Vorboss' business development accelerators was the introduction of unrestricted PIA in 2019 which opened up Openreach's ducts and poles at scale, allowing other companies to build their own networks using the civils work that Openreach had already done. "That opened a new door for us," added Creswick. "While access to Openreach ducting had been available before 2019, use of access was restricted. This change was a chance to shift the economics of our business."

"We took our customer base, our expertise and experience and applied those to running our own network. That's what we set out to do in 2020, raising circa £250 million in capital and deploying a premium, high capacity fibre network to provide direct Internet access connectivity to

London's most demanding business customers."

Creswick says that Vorboss' primary point of difference is capacity, offering 10Gbps, 25Gbps (via channel partners) and 100Gbps. "Our target market is any business in any sector with a presence in London – and data should not be a constraint on their growth," he added. "I believe in providing abundant capacity. You don't question if you'll have

## Success will only come through attracting a diversity of thought and talent

enough water or electricity coming into your building. Data should be no different."

Creswick also expects to see a significant increase in enterprise demand for more reliable, resilient connectivity, and it'll happen 'all of a sudden'. "The market is still at a relatively early adopter phase but that will reach a critical mass where adoption of abundant capacity becomes the mainstream norm," he added. "Many network operators aren't geared up for that."

An important industry change that could hasten this development, says Creswick, is the creation of an environment where businesses can more easily identify the network that works best for them.

"There are Ofcom reports on customer complaints for consumer and mobile services and multiple bodies comparing mobile coverage and average speeds," he

added. "But not in the fixed business market. Something as simple as comparing each networks' average time to fix a fault would help businesses navigate the best choice for them. We are talking to Government and Ofcom about this. If we get that right the productivity gains would be enormous."

## Diversity and inclusion

Taking an industry lead and driving positive change echoes Creswick's objective to put plenty of space between himself and also-rans on the track. According to Creswick, two other key factors that set Vorboss apart are the aforementioned

in-house workforce (rather than relying on contractors), and his workforce being truly diverse. "More than a third of our technicians are women and we're aiming to make that 50 per cent by 2027," he added. "The Vorboss Training Academy is designed to give people access to the telecoms industry for the first time while equipping them with a detailed understanding of our network."

"Our policies and benefits also address the challenges that women and people from under-represented socio-economic backgrounds face in starting a career in our sector. Continued success will only come through attracting a diversity of thought and talent in the coming decades."

If you haven't deduced this already, Creswick is also a staunchly independent thinker unmoved by the influence of conventional thinking, therefore he is open

to change on a number of levels and clear minded on how trends in the fibre space will shape up. "Consolidation is inevitable," he stated. "But unlike many others, I don't think this will rapidly reduce the number of operators into a small set of larger players. With the cost of capital so high by comparison to when many networks secured investment, things are going to get difficult for the networks not seeing good adoption. Merging two networks with low take up doesn't solve that problem."

"Also, the business connectivity market is more mature than WLA/residential. In our market, channel partners and intermediaries are more familiar with navigating a multi-network landscape. When combining that with a much higher average revenue per customer, enterprise focused networks face different commercial incentives to the residential altnets."

## Adaptability is key

It is therefore vital for channel companies to understand the changing role of connectivity and the way customers are using digital services, believes Creswick. "Resellers need to strategically transform their organisations to meet changing needs over the coming years," he urged. "Some of the most successful companies in the world have started from the premise that whatever got us here today, and whatever worked yesterday, will not continue to work tomorrow. That applies to our industry. If your best customers are also taking this approach they won't just be looking at you to renew. They will want you to help them figure out how to continue being successful." ■

## Just a minute with Tim Creswick...

**What talent do you wish you had?** To absorb information immediately. Wouldn't that be incredible? In business, when I feel deficient in an area I go away and learn it. There's a limit to that, of course. But that's my approach and something the team also tries to adopt.

## Tell us something about yourself we don't know:

I'm a professional racing driver, competing in the GT World Challenge Europe with Walkenhorst Motorsport, driving the Aston Martin Vantage GT3.

**Industry wish:** For the sector to stop selling on bandwidth. It's only a small part of the conversation.

**Best advice you have been given:** Every mic is a live mic, guiding how you conduct yourself, even in private. This thought makes you do the right thing at every turn and protect your reputation at all times.

**One example of something you have overcome:** Turning Vorboss into a vertically integrated network builder and service provider. People said it couldn't be done, but we're doing it.

**Your biggest career achievement:** Success is important. But getting there in a way that you can be proud of is something that we need to always have front of mind. I'm proud that we have managed to hold on to that belief as a four person business and a 400 person company.

**What could you not do without in your job?** Our office. We're a team that loves working together. A close second is my dog, Maya. She joins all my meetings.

**Top tip for resellers:** Think about how the connectivity landscape has changed and what it will look like in ten years time.



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# How far will intelligence

Here we explore how intelligence is being applied across the connectivity spectrum and the extent to which clever connectivity will redefine value for end users and the channel, and provide a long-term competitive advantage for resellers and MSPs.

It's fair to say that the ICT channel is largely unsure about what the future holds in terms of AI and the rise of intelligent networks. So we garnered the projections and insights of five leading channel organisations to help get a handle on what we can expect in the not too distant future. According to Mark Toman, Client Director, BT Wholesale, the concept of connectivity intelligence is based on high speed, low latency networks supporting a myriad of cutting edge technologies from AI to IoT. "What's exciting is how 5G and next generation multi-cloud networking brings significant opportunities for resellers and end users," he said.

Toman noted that network slicing will enable resellers to deliver new and improved capabilities for customers in the 5G standalone

era, and offer tailored connectivity with different requirements on speed, latency and reliability for specific applications. He also indicated that edge holds much potential for the channel. "Edge can alleviate demand from an organisation's own servers and eliminate unnecessary data from the cloud, and low latency can be maintained despite extremely high traffic from data-hungry apps and platforms," he added. "With ever-increasing digitalisation and emerging tech like AI and extended reality, this demand will only increase.

"Extended reality is on the brink of a huge revolution that will be delivered by edge. For example, it can support mission-critical industries such as data processing in hospitals and remote monitoring of assets in the oil and gas industry. With edge you have a



Adrian Sunderland

**It is imperative for channel partners to be thinking about what makes their connectivity options stand out from the crowd.**

network in a box which offers a seamless experience. That said, it's all well and good striving for connectivity intelligence but a fresh strategy is needed where we bring the ecosystem together and work with partners to deliver bespoke solutions for customers."

To succeed the channel must remain hyper-focused on the problems end users need solving, pointed out Toman. "We need to work backwards with specific use cases in mind to make technology solutions like edge a reality and drive value for businesses," he added. "Importantly, we must not overlook that central to this innovation is reliable, scalable and secure connectivity."

Jola CEO Adrian Sunderland interprets connectivity intelligence as a combination

of intelligent devices that configure themselves based on the connectivity type available and the reseller or customer requirements. "Intelligent devices keep themselves up to date and can adopt configuration changes as required, all without manual configuration by engineers," he stated. "Independently of the device, intelligent networks provide the right type of network services whether a private closed network, an Internet access network or a hybrid private network with secure Internet access. Intelligent tariffs provide the right price dependent on usage and all of this should be managed by an intelligent portal, cradle to grave, regardless of the underlying provider."

Sunderland is seeing more and more tenders where intelligent connectivity

features are listed as being mandatory. In particular, end user accessible management portals, APIs and flexible commercial models are being specified by prospective customers. "We recently did a connectivity deal for 1,400 sites in the UK where the intelligent device element alone added around £40k of upfront margin thanks to the self-configuring nature of the devices compared to the reseller pre-configuring and pre-staging in-house," added Sunderland. "It is imperative for channel partners to be thinking about what makes their connectivity options stand out from the crowd. Channel partners should also be thinking about the total cost of ownership and margin opportunity."

**Catching the trends**

When assessing the trends that are shaping the future of connectivity, Dale Parkinson, Managing Director for Connectivity at Giacom, also defines intelligent connectivity as the convergence of AI, low latency 5G networks and IoT applications enabled by dense fibre at the edge of the network. "Much of the conceptual thinking about what intelligent connectivity enables has been with us for a number of years – think smart cities, smart manufacturing, smart healthcare etc," he said. "The challenge is that we need all of the components



Mark Toman

**Extended reality is on the brink of a huge revolution that will be delivered by edge.**

# Can we redefine connectivity?

to be deployed at scale and available at a reasonable cost for widespread adoption. We may be a few years away from this but the pace of change and innovation is increasing at a phenomenal rate."

Therefore Giacom is wasting no time in laying the foundations for more intelligent connectivity solutions, and the future role of AI across the connectivity spectrum is also high on Parkinson's agenda. "Practical, scaled applications are demonstrating use cases that we can understand and use in our everyday work and personal life," added Parkinson. "What is less clear is the evolution and adoption of AI over the medium-term, the role it plays and how or if we should seek to regulate and control its use."



Dale Parkinson

## Much of the conceptual thinking about what intelligent connectivity enables has been with us for a number of years.

Parkinson observed that the adoption of intelligent connectivity, be that AI tools like Copilot or 5G network technologies, is growing by the day, but he identified near-term limiting factors which are important to address. "Firstly, the commercial build out of FTTP networks is accelerating but we are still some way off having the compute power at the edge of the network required to offer AI-enabled services at scale," he explained.

"Secondly, there remains circa nine million copper-based services that need moving to a fibre or digital alternative. This conversion of copper to fibre will drive demand in all markets for AI-enabled tooling and improve our partners' ability to deliver AI-based services."

The answer to the question of whether channel partners should be thinking more 'intelligently' about their connectivity options is an easy one to answer, believes Parkinson. "From conversations we're having with channel partners the industry is already thinking more intelligently," he

commented. "One of the greatest strengths of the channel is its ability to make the best out of a constantly changing and evolving digital landscape. The transition into a future of AI and intelligent connectivity will be no different."

### Rising requests

Matt Mimo, CEO, 7ARDIS Wholesale, has witnessed a growing number of connectivity intelligence requests from IT professionals across the board. He believes that public sector focused resellers have a 'great opportunity' to demonstrate connectivity intelligence through FWA and Private Mobile Networks (PMNs). "The mobile opportunity offers channel partners maximum potential for new revenue, whether that is SIMO or solution wraps," he stated. "Offer customers the choice between SIMO and solutions with software. This is the new standard that even small businesses expect in today's procurement process."

Mimo also noted that intelligent connectivity has strong year-on-year growth, historically with low data

M2M solutions. "But with the rising supply of third party software vendors smart mobile solutions can be enjoyed across any dynamic SIM, globally," he commented. "5G is not essential. Connectivity intelligence refers to the strength of an IoT network, meaning LPWA technologies can be used to deploy intelligent connectivity."

7ARDIS' AI journey began in 2018 and the company has now hired an AI coder to support reseller growth. "AI will play a big role in decision making," added Mimo. "The channel needs to learn and understand connectivity intelligence and how AI can be leveraged."

A growing number of service providers are focusing on gaining greater intelligence about their networks and using it as a differentiator when delivering connectivity, observed Highlight COO Martin Saunders. But he says human intelligence is ultimately the most telling factor in a service provider's connectivity proposition. "AI will help drive greater efficiency and automation

in the management of networks and infrastructure," he stated. "This will be most apparent at the core network level. However, when dealing with individuals at a branch level AI will certainly help with initial diagnosis and fault finding – but ultimately, the way to keep customers happy is to provide human interaction."

### Intelligent humans

Therefore Saunders does not expect to see the emergence of entirely AI-driven service providers any time soon. "You will have AI doing the automation and optimisation, the simplest tasks," he added. "You will then use your intelligent humans to drive the innovation. Highlight is focused on trying to help non-technical members of staff access the knowledge and intelligence they need. This enables them to properly look after their customers' services, make sensible decisions about what needs to happen on the network and advise on how to improve it. Channel partners will be using their knowledge, experience and intelligence to ensure the best possible network service." ■



Matt Mimo

The channel needs to understand connectivity intelligence and how AI can be leveraged.



Martin Saunders

Ultimately, the way to keep customers happy is to provide human interaction.

Fast-forward to high-performance

PXC

# Channel reacts to Telecom

Ofcom has kicked off its Telecoms Access Review 2026, a review of the regulations that will apply to the UK fixed telecoms markets from April 2026 until March 2031. Here, channel leaders share their views on the key factors Ofcom needs to consider as it seeks to ensure the right environment to promote competition, investment, improved services and greater choice for customers.



**JENNY HARRISON,**  
DIRECTOR OF SUPPLY  
AND PARTNERSHIPS  
PXC

The 2026-2031 period will be a different environment to that envisaged in the 2021 review, and regulation must adapt to this new reality. Ofcom will need to ask whether it's in consumers' interests to maintain Openreach wholesale prices substantially above its costs in areas where there is no altnet build, and no altnet build is likely. Ofcom must also develop an environment which fosters FTTP take up and high FTTP quality (rather than the previous focus on FTTP build) and ensures strong retail competition which is key for consumers. A new issue for this review is the framework for how exchange closure/exit works so that the significant cost savings for Openreach are shared with consumers and CPs.



**KEVIN MCNULTY**  
STRATEGY DIRECTOR  
ITS TECHNOLOGY  
GROUP

The objective of this review must be to establish a framework that ensures the best deal for the end consumer, driven by a fair and competitive market for all players. This requires continued regulation and vigilance. Deregulation and PIA pricing strategy should be robustly explored in this review. Previous regulation established a framework that has created a more competitive fibre marketplace. The predictability it has provided enabled altnets to accrue a combined multi-billion investment to build a substantial footprint across the UK. This momentum also created a catalyst for the incumbents to invest. Mandating access to BT Openreach's ducts and poles has also been a game-changer.



**JAMES FREDRICKSON**  
CHIEF CORPORATE  
AFFAIRS OFFICER  
VORBOSS

There is no need for radical change. We want the opposite. The approach that Ofcom has taken since the last market review in 2021 is working well and we welcome the continuation of the steady and predictable regulatory environment that is beneficial for those seeking investment, especially in an environment of high cost of capital and low economic growth. In its TAR statement, Ofcom is right to keep its focus on monitoring BT and Openreach's dominance. The job of creating a truly competitive market is far from done. Despite increasing network-level competition, BT Group still holds substantial market share across consumer and business services. Any softening of regulatory controls risks deterring further investment in its competitors.



**JAMIE HUGHES**  
UK SALES DIRECTOR  
EVOLVE IP

Investment and promoting network competition is crucial in any sector, especially one that plays a big part in the growth of the country and providers like ourselves. The market ensures there are enough operators to provide competitive services and commercials. The fibre providers that have emerged over the past five years provide consumers and businesses with options and creates opportunities for hosted voice providers like ourselves to layer additional services over the top. I see lots of progress has been made so far but there's clearly more work ahead too. The fibre companies are mostly backed by venture capitalists, who will eventually be looking to get a return from their investment and either look to pull dividends or sell their businesses which will lead to consolidation.

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# ms Access Review 2026



**GUY MILLER**  
CEO  
MS3

Ofcom's regulatory stance in the last review opened the door to new levels of network competition in the UK, increasing fibre availability at a dramatic rate. This private investment has awoken the sleeping giants of Openreach and Virgin and got them to also ramp up their commitment to a fully fibre Britain. The job is not done though: With high interest rates and increased competition Ofcom must look to protect this nascent industry by encouraging altnet adoption, preventing incumbents from abusing their dominant positions and not relaxing regulations. Ofcom needs to engage with as many altnets as possible in the run-up to the TAR consultation.



**MARK RIDDELL**  
CHANNEL DIRECTOR  
ABZORB

We hope that the updated Ofcom report will include strict regulations on levels of service, lead and installation times. The telecoms market has always been poorly regulated. With the uplift in broadband and lease line connectivity further to the PSTN and ISDN switch off, plus the new entrants to the market providing fibre, there will be an exponential increase in the demand for telecoms engineers. Unfortunately, many resellers are struggling to deliver a seamless customer experience, making it difficult for them to build strong relationships with customers. Hopefully there will be stricter regulations and SLAs introduced so the network providers and the contracted engineers are accountable to deliver short lead times and a seamless service.



**GRAEME GORDON**  
CEO  
IFB

As a smaller B2B CP based in Scotland, I feel regulation is doing a pretty good job. The need for us, telcos and Openreach and our customers especially to have predictable, stable periods of service availability and accessibility is critical. Just as important is resisting calls for the industry to deregulate more quickly by those trying to short circuit good practice for a quick buck. We know our sector has struggled to keep up with technology. With emerging LOE, which is a fibre alternative, AI and Quantum. How do the regulators keep up? Perhaps shorter, lighter, review cycles would help. There is nothing wrong with a 'can't touch for a while', 'could touch medium term', or 'needs to be fixed short-term' approach. This must be focused on customer service and letting competition and choice compete on an uneven playing field.



**NEIL MUTTOCK**  
COMMERCIAL  
DIRECTOR  
EVOLVE

TAR marks a step forward for the industry, fostering a more competitive telecommunications landscape. The initial measures taken as part of the first publication saw Openreach grant fibre providers access to its physical infrastructure throughout the UK. This has helped create a level playing field for both established players and emerging innovators and resulted in altnet FTTP networks making up more than half of the 57 per cent FTTP coverage across the UK. However, Ofcom, Openreach, altnets and local governments must collaborate to efficiently expand full fibre coverage to the more difficult to access areas. Ofcom can then pioneer additional funding mechanisms or regulatory measures to improve access to full fibre for the 23 per cent of rural UK businesses.



**FURQAN ALAMGIR**  
CO-FOUNDER AND  
CEO  
CONNEXIN

The next reviews in 2026 (Hull is reviewed a few months after the rest of the UK) must sustain competition while enabling altnets to continue building high quality coverage. Currently we, and other networks, benefit from access to shared infrastructure across the rest of the UK. With our work on the government's flagship Project Gigabit programme in the east midlands, for example, we can build quickly and effectively in partnership with Openreach. The last Hull review in 2021 found that KCOM, the incumbent, had 'significant market power' but didn't resolve the issue of infrastructure sharing, therefore altnets in Hull have been forced to build parallel infrastructure. This is changing, thanks to updates to the law and a more assertive regulator. But it is vital that infrastructure access is fully resolved in 2026.



**JERRY WASTIE**  
PUBLIC SECTOR  
SALES MANAGER  
MLL TELECOM

Ofcom should consider overbuild in residential areas. We have seen examples of three separate providers laying new fibre in the same streets. Additionally, PIA has not been embraced as widely as expected and has introduced considerable bureaucracy that is likely to deter take-up. In major fibre infrastructure roll outs, detailed consideration must be given to the ongoing light-up and guaranteed support of the service over time to provide certainty to potential wholesalers and consumers. We expect major consolidation after the initial peak in investment and Ofcom should be wary of protecting wholesalers and customers through what could be a turbulent market. One noticeable limitation of full fibre roll outs from new providers is being able to offer customers highly resilient services at competitive price points.



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Forest of Arden Midlands



**CHANNEL CHAMPIONS**  
4th July 2024  
Regents Park London



**comms national awards**  
26th September 2024  
Park Plaza Westminster



**commsvision**  
THE GLENEAGLES HOTEL  
6th - 8th November 2024  
The Gleneagles Hotel Scotland

For full details of our awards and industry networking events visit.



# Rickerd promoted



Josie Rickerd

FOLLOWING a successful 12 year period with ANS as a leader of commercial teams and overseeing some of the company's most prominent accounts Josie Rickerd has been promoted as Director of Enterprise Account Management.

Rickerd stated: "This role sits at the heart of the business, allowing me to work closely with different departments and giving me a holistic perspective of what we can do to ensure our clients' success."

ANS CEO Richard Thompson added: "Josie always has customers at the forefront of her mind and wants to deliver the best solutions for them. I'm confident she will continue to deliver strategies that improve growth and retention."

The move follows the appointment of Microsoft MVP Kyle Hill as Technical Services Delivery Director.

## Also on the move...

DAN Portus has joined Air IT as Chief Experience Officer (CXO). He moves from FCDO Services where he was Head of Customer Journey and was also Co-Chair of the Cross Government Customer Experience Network. Prior roles include a near 12 year stint at Tesco where he became Business Planning Manager. Air IT COO



Dan Portus

James Healey commented:

"Dan's track record in leading customer-focused initiatives aligns with our vision." Portus commented: "With a focus on both human and digital aspects I'm setting a clear vision for seamless service delivery."

**MANAGED network and IT services provider Evolve has named Stuart Milroy as Head of Technical Delivery. He has 30 years industry experience and was Head of Project Management and Professional Services at Adept4, Head of Project at Ensign Communications and Senior IT Project Manager at Maintel and Intrinsic Technology. Evolve CEO Alan Stephenson-Brown said: "Stuart's ability to navigate complex projects, mentor teams and drive results has earned him a great reputation."**

VOICEFLEX' sales supremo Ben Redknap has been promoted to the Channel Account Director position following his 'outstanding performance' as Channel Account Manager.

"Ben consistently exceeded targets and showcased his ability to effectively manage both the hunting and farming aspects of the role," commented CCO Paul Taylor. Redknap's prowess was also recognised at last year's Channel Champions Awards where he scooped the Sales Manager of the Year gong. "Ben's promotion is well deserved recognition of his outstanding contributions to Voiceflex," added Taylor. "His understanding of partners, coupled with his dedication to achieving results, makes him the ideal candidate for this role."



Ben Redknap

**CRITICAL national infrastructure security expert Ray Stanton has been pulled in by Bridewell as Board Adviser. The former CISO and CSO has 30-plus years cybersecurity, risk management and commercial experience in the UK, US and Nordics. Prior roles include senior positions at BT, National Grid, IBM, TDC Group and Airbus UK. Stanton said: "I have valuable insights into the cybersecurity market. A vital part of our strategy must be to listen intensively to our customers."**

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# Empowering Altnets: Strategies for Sustainable Growth

## Facilitating Altnet advancement: the role of XT<sup>3</sup>Lab

Before Altnets can embrace innovation and unlock new pathways to growth, first, they must fully understand the current capabilities of their networks and the transformative technology available to find their full potential.

Enter Xantaro's Technology, Testing & Training Laboratory, XT<sup>3</sup>Lab, a unique test, evolution, and training environment at the heart of complex network architecture innovation. By leveraging Xantaro's expertise and industry-leading XT<sup>3</sup>Lab, Altnets can amplify their network capabilities, scale infrastructure, and ensure interoperability and resiliency to enhance their potential for future growth.

## At the core of network infrastructure

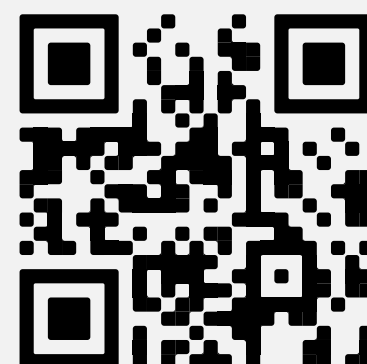
The Altnet market in the UK is full of commercial opportunity, yet innovators face a myriad of challenges on their path to success. However, the right strategies and partnerships transform these obstacles into catalysts for growth and innovation, and Xantaro has a strong track record of fuelling growth across the Altnet fibre market, empowering Altnets with top-tier technical expertise and support combined with flexible, scalable infrastructure hardware.

At the heart of Xantaro's success lies its commitment to bridging knowledge and skills gaps within the industry. By providing technical expertise and support, Xantaro empowers Altnets to accelerate their growth trajectories and achieve their long-term objectives. In turn, enabling them to validate plans, develop commercially viable solutions, and navigate regulatory landscapes with confidence.

## Finding the right partner

Altnets are already making strides in the right direction, and the key to success lies in finding the right partner. Just as major ISPs in the UK collaborate with partners for network services, Altnets should seek experienced allies and connect with collaborators that can truly unleash the power of their high-performance networks.

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