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THE HEARTBEAT OF THE UK ICT INDUSTRY



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This month's movers and shakers



Game-changing event launched

AN INDUSTRY first UK-wide festival of events and initiatives launched by BPL Business Media (UK Partner Week, July 3rd-10th 2025) aims to help the ICT channel realise the full potential of partner-led growth, leadership and talent.

SPECIAL REPORT

UK Partner Week opens with a celebration of people-focused success at The Channel Champions Awards 2025 (3rd July, Regents Park, London).

At the heart of UK Partner Week is the UKPW25 Summit (July 9th, Convene, 133 Houndsditch, London), a unique one day event dedicated to sharing ideas, experiences and insights around the UK's channel partner community, while promoting the channel's pivotal role in driving collaboration, innovation and growth in the UK economy.

The UKPW25 Summit aims to help delegates enrich their strategic vision and growth strategies, develop future leaders within their organisations, benchmark their business models against industry best practices and network in a fun environment.

BPL Group MD Michael O'Brien said: "Our businesses – IT Europa and BPL Business Media (publisher of Comms Dealer) – believe in the power of the channel and UK Partner Week is a new, highly focused initiative designed to promote the channel's valuable role in supporting UK businesses.

"The UKPW25 Summit will see delegates gain valuable knowledge, connect with peers and celebrate the channel's contribution to the UK economy. It's going to be a game-changer." **Cont'd on p6**

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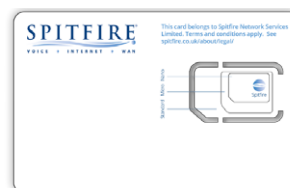
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Welcome comment



Stuart Gilroy

WHILE having determination is generally viewed as a good attribute, there are more aspects to it than meets the eye. For example, I was brimming with determination the other weekend, but trying to catch a big pike from the River Welland on the exposed fens during

Storm Bert was quite challenging. It cost me an expensive coat and a few scrapes and bruises but I'm glad I went because it was an unforgettable experience. Would I do the same again? Yes, because I realised that it's a question of risk and reward that can be linked to a recurring theme common among many of the business leaders we profile in Comms Dealer magazine.

You might have noticed that we like to share personal insights about our interviewees, to give readers a fully rounded and holistic sense of the person as well as their strategies and the business they lead. One of our quickfire questions asks what they would have done differently with the benefit of hindsight, and the most common response is, 'I would have taken more risks', or, 'I would have gone more with my gut feelings'.

These responses hint at opportunities missed and put a spotlight on the mechanics of decision making weighted towards risk aversion – even when there may be no risk. And if there was, it's all part of the journey, adds to character building and is an education when it comes to preparing for the next time. Those responses also suggest that having the determination to 'go for it' would have likely delivered positive results rather than regrets.

Taking risks sharpens your focus, breeds clarity of strategic thinking, builds confidence in decision making and with a fair wind brings bigger and better results. I forgot to mention earlier that I caught a personal best.

Stuart Gilroy, Editor

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

NI hike risks future talent

THE minimum wage rise and hike in employers' NI must not come at the cost of a depleted future talent pool in the comms sector, warned Charlotte Goodwill, CEO, the Institute of Telecommunications Professionals (ITP).

"We can't let NI rises be a reason to scale back on apprenticeships and investment in young talent," stated Goodwill. "If we want a thriving telecoms sector we must invest in the next generation, even when it feels financially challenging. The costs are temporary but the benefits of a skilled, future-ready workforce are permanent."

Goodwill conceded that a 41% increase in the cost to employ an 18-year-old trainee is 'steep', especially when compared to the 6% rise for experienced hires over the coming two of years.

"However, investing in apprenticeships isn't just about addressing immediate needs, it's about creating a pipeline of skilled professionals who will drive future innovation and growth," added Goodwill. "The long-term benefits far outweigh the short-term challenges."



Charlotte Goodwill

We can't let NI rises be a reason to scale back on apprenticeships and investment in young talent.

According to Goodwill, businesses have for too long focused on quick wins, hiring experienced talent rather than nurturing the next generation.

"Our industry is facing a talent crisis," she said. "Instead of seeing cost increases as an obstacle we should ask: How can we adapt?"

"Young people are eager to join our sector. They bring fresh energy, creativity and a digital-first mindset. By leveraging existing schemes and Government funding apprenticeships can become a key part of a broader strategy."

See pages 38-39 for more industry reaction to the NI hike.

Editor's picks

BDR Group has bolstered its enterprise IT play with the acquisition of London-based MBA Information Technology. The deal adds circa £10m annual revenue and is the latest in a string of acquisitions since BDR stepped up its M&A strategy in 2016. MBA IT began its commercial life in 2005 and specialises in IT infrastructure and associated products and services. It has a particular strength in the retail and professional services sectors.

GIACOM'S acquisition of Inform Billing adds BI and analytics capabilities plus IPR to its Cloud Market Tools. The move advances Giacom's strategy to provide partners with an agnostic toolset across multiple suppliers. Giacom CEO Terry O'Brien stated: "The addition of Inform Billing provides partners with deeper insights into their revenue streams, supporting profitability." Inform Billing founder and Managing Director Shaun Bodsworth added: "The partnership also brings investment that will accelerate the R&D of our solutions, enabling partners to benefit more from advanced BI and revenue analysis."

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Editor's picks



A NEW refinancing partnership with ThinCats has boosted Redsquid's national expansion campaign which entered a new phase last month with the acquisition of Aberdeen-based MSP IT Hotdesk. The ThinCats deal gives Borehamwood-based Redsquid a springboard for 'substantial growth' next year, further accelerating its

M&A strategy. CEO Sohni Raithatha (pictured) stated: "This refinancing agreement provides us with the financial agility to pursue strategic acquisitions that will strengthen our service offerings and broaden our reach across the UK."

PROVENTEQ'S strength in the Enterprise Content Management (ECM), Intelligent Information Management and AI-led markets has been bolstered following a multi-million-pound investment from BGF. Proventeq was established in 2007 and generated 24% revenue growth last year helping companies migrate and modernise their legacy ECM platforms, implementing compliance and governance solutions and accelerating the adoption of AI-Copilot based solutions.

"As companies look to modernise their legacy systems and ensure regulatory compliance, robust data management and governance becomes essential," stated Proventeq CEO Nitin Mahajan. "Our goal is to help organisations establish strong foundations with secure and modernised data platforms, enabling them to harness the power of AI and automation."

EXERTIS parent company DCC has nailed its flag to the energy sector and will likely sell its technology division. DCC is reportedly simplifying its portfolio and is said to be already preparing for the sale of DCC Healthcare. Exertis IT CEO Tim Griffin commented: "As we explore the possibility of new ownership our focus remains on customers and vendor partners."

HG-BACKED Focus Group has snapped up three more targets, bagging Ipswich-based mobile firm TMAC in a deal that boosts its mobile proposition and partnerships; Altrincham headquartered CCaaS provider Contact Systems, bolstering its CX portfolio; and SME focused MSP Prism which has an emphasis on security and the financial services sector.

Merger deal creates titan

LAST month's merger of RunTide Capital-backed ATSG and Evolve IP creates an IT MSP titan with more than \$230 million combined revenue and over 1,700 customers. Most of the revenue is monthly recurring under long-term contracts.

ATSG is an IT MSP and cybersecurity specialist and the transaction (ATSG has a controlling majority) is expected to accelerate its services and solutions capabilities for mid and enterprise customers.

The company will also drive the development of EMEA partnerships and its global white label business.

"Evolve IP offers a suite of desktop-as-a-service, cloud communications and contact centre solutions," commented Russ Reeder, CEO of the unified organisation.

"Combined with ATSG's infrastructure-centric managed services we will strengthen our collective position in the market and provide better outcomes for our customers."

Evolve IP CEO Jeff Courson stated: "We're leveraging ATSG's IP and services capabilities to deliver an increasingly end-to-end solution."



Paul Harrison

Evolve IP EMEA Managing Director Paul Harrison said: "ATSG brings skills, funding and technologies to the table."

M&A news

CHESS ICT's acquisition of Microsoft partner Silversands last month adds 100-plus enterprise and public sector customers. Chess ICT Chairman David Pollock said: "The acquisition enhances our capability and brings new talent and customers, along with products and services that deliver value." Daniel Brecker, Director, FRP Corporate Finance (which advised the shareholders of Silversands), added: "In Silversands, Chess ICT has acquired a complementary product set and a skilled team of consultants and developers. There is a strong cultural and strategic fit. We expect there to be continued consolidation in the Microsoft IT consultancy space."

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UK Partner Week poised to raise ICT channel bar

Recognising the power of the ICT channel and that its biggest strength is in partnerships and people, UK Partner Week (July 3rd-10th 2025) will be wholly dedicated to bringing the best out of the industry and its leaders.

UK Partner Week will place a big emphasis on realising business and people potential within a progressive and fun environment, and recognise the ICT channel's important role in supporting businesses and the UK economy – while highlighting the growth opportunities that lie ahead.

BPL Group (Partner Week organiser) Managing Director Michael O'Brien said: "Partner Week will provide resources that enable channel partners to invest in their leadership, sales, marketing and technical talent. The UKPW25 Summit will be the ultimate expression of these goals – a place where partners and vendors can collaborate and create strategies for individual and business growth. We invite organisations who share these values to join the Partner Week community."

The UK ICT market is anticipated to grow at an annual rate of 10-plus per cent reaching a total value of \$250 billion by 2027. The channel is in the fast lane with partner-delivered ICT and services projected to grow at a faster annual rate (five-plus per cent) than direct or vendor-delivered services (three-plus per cent) through 2026. Partner-delivered technology and



UK Partner Week is set to be an unforgettable experience for industry leaders and their teams

services reached \$3.4 trillion in 2023, accounting for more than 70 per cent of the global market, a trend that is set to continue and expand.

Opportunity

Launch sponsor PXC embraced UK Partner Week as the right platform to address the growing market and recognise the remarkable contribution of the channel community to the UK's economy, while fostering the creation of new resources, partnerships and opportunities. PXC Director of Products & Marketing

Neil Wilson stated: "PXC is delighted to be among the launch sponsors for UK Partner Week 2025. Partners are at the heart of our business so we are proud to join this great initiative, celebrating the channel's enormous contribution to the UK economy."

Nick O'Donovan, Head of Sales EMEA at UKPW25 sponsor Huntress, added: "Huntress is custom built for the needs of SMBs and the MSPs that secure them, and we see UK Partner Week as an ideal platform to

foster the relationships and understanding that will fortify their cyber posture and keep pace with emerging threats."

UK Partner Week will also be supported by a select group of UKPW Ambassadors. These high profile industry leaders and influencers will act as standard bearers for the continued development of organisational excellence across the channel. Partner Week Ambassador Paul Hooper, CEO, Uplands OneTelco, commented: "I'm delighted to be an Ambassador for Partner

Week. The vision of fostering innovation, growth and collaboration resonates strongly with me, and I am excited to be part of something that aims to deliver a meaningful commercial and cultural impact in our sector."

Exciting initiative

Fellow Partner Week Ambassador Ruth Kennedy, CEO of comms reseller TalkTalk Business (TTB), added: "As one of the UK's major comms partners, TTB is committed to investing in its teams and propositions, therefore I am delighted to be an Ambassador for this exciting initiative."

Channel partners and MSPs are invited to freely promote and co-brand their own events and programmes as part of UKPW25 through the digital and social channels being set up for the event. Vendors and service providers are also invited to participate (full details are available on request).

O'Brien added: "UK Partner Week is set to be an unforgettable experience where industry leaders and their teams will gain valuable knowledge, connect with peers and celebrate the channel community's enduring contribution to the UK economy." ■

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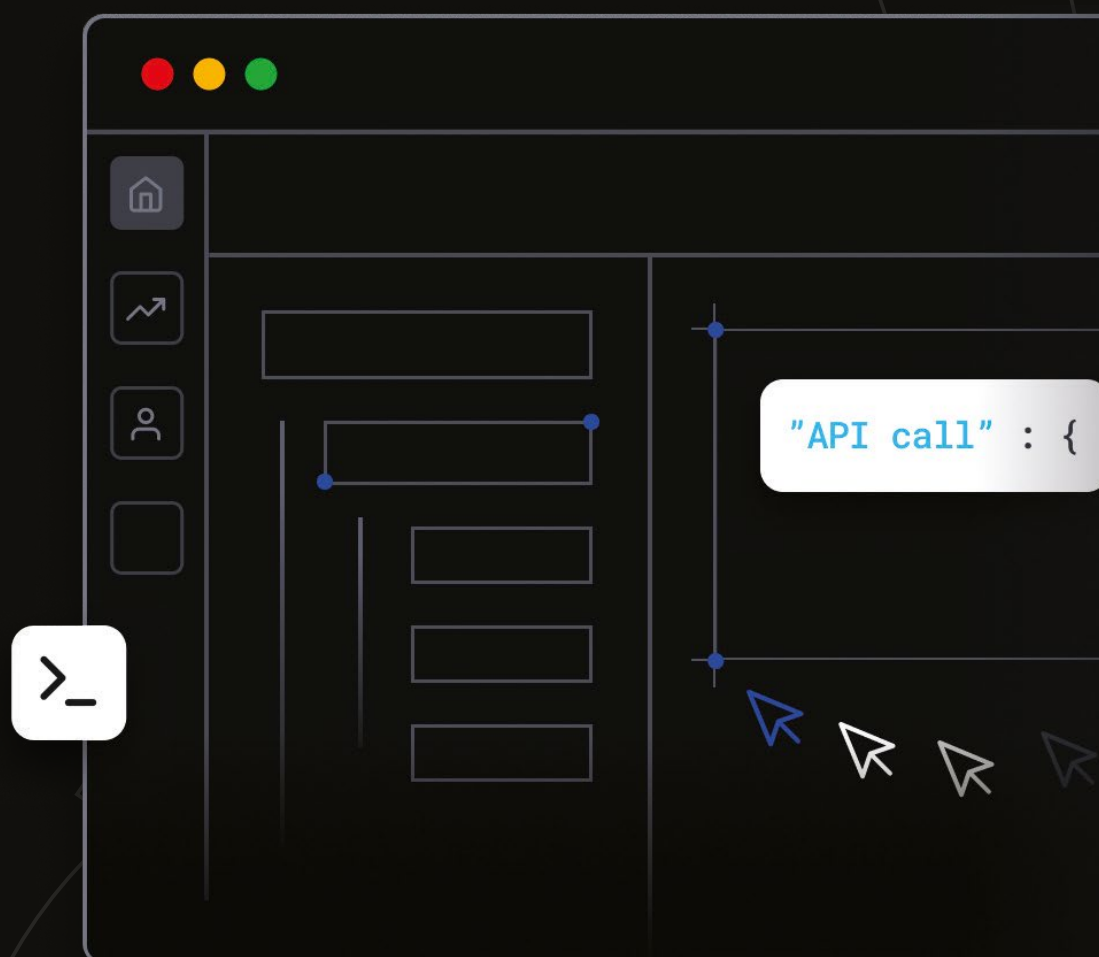
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Sztejka's big mission

Newly appointed BT Wholesale Managing Director Thea Sztejka is on a mission to streamline how the business operates through a 'relentless focus on automation' and being easy to work with – while aiming to take the firm's diversity and sustainability agenda to the next level.

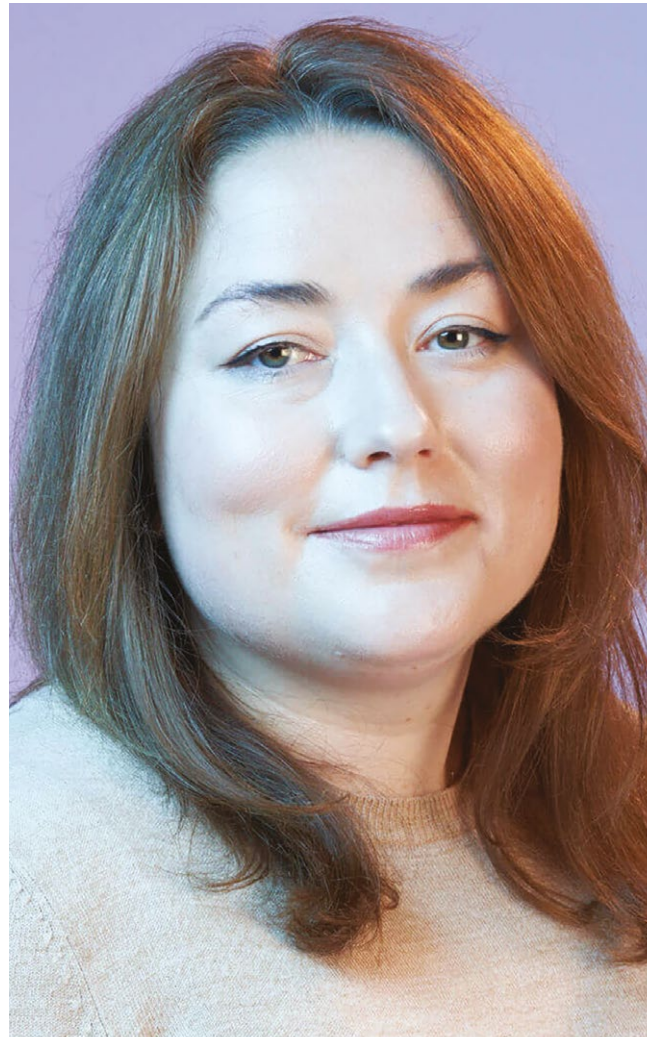
Sztejka joined BT in early 2017 and became BT Wholesale's Commercial and Propositions Director in 2021, and is now channelling her experience into the BT Wholesale Managing Director role she assumed in October. Her key priorities include simplifying business processes, becoming more partner focused and taking infrastructure and solutions to the next level. "This means building on our propositions and having a relentless focus on automation," she stated. "From APIs to more face-to-face meetings and quality time with partners at events, we are investing in seamless ways of working and ensuring that we are always results-focused."

Sztejka believes BT Wholesale has an opportunity to work more closely with partners and she cited this channel collaboration factor as a key reason for taking the role. "I will be stepping out from

behind the spreadsheets and seeing much more of our customers," she added. "I want to create a partner experience with trust, reliability and sustainability being foundational. I am passionate about investing quality time in people, which means listening carefully to our partners to understand their needs."

The immediate focus of these conversations will be navigating the change from legacy to new digital networks and positioning partners to capitalise on this shift. "We are encouraging the move from copper to fibre, analogue to digital and 3G to 5G," she added. "Partners need to act now to reap the benefits of being a digital business."

According to BT Wholesale research less than a third of IT decision makers are prioritising the shift to all-IP. "Our message to the channel is simple – act now to future proof your operations and



Thea Sztejka

Partners need to act now to reap the benefits of being a digital business

reap the rewards of being a digital business," urged Sztejka. "Smart channel players are already investing in both all-IP and 5G to maximise the strength and reliability of their connections. The business case is almost always a good one long-term. That's why having a trusted partner that delivers is so critical."

BT Wholesale is also doubling down on its AI play. "Preparing to maximise the benefits of AI is one

of the most significant technology trends all businesses and partners are looking at," added Sztejka. "We want to work with partners to enable this."

Opportunities

UcaaS is another growth area identified by Sztejka, again referring to research that shows many IT decision makers need fewer applications and simplified ways to collaborate. However, less than half have a UCaaS platform in place. "Again,

there's lots of opportunity for the channel here," she added. "Modernisation is happening all around us with changes enabled by 5G, All-IP and the advancement of AI providing new ways of working and improvements. We will keep our finger on the pulse and innovating in line with changing trends – technology will always remain core to our strategy."

Sztejka will continue to elevate BT Wholesale's diversity agenda and is an active and vocal mentor for the company's Women in Wholesale programme. "I will continue to champion people from all backgrounds," she said. "People are at the heart of what we do and I will keep that front and centre in the coming year and beyond. In my career to date, diversity has always led to commercial success."

Sztejka is also a sustainability champion and aims to encourage partners to become front runners on the green journey. "Ensuring sustainability targets and ambitions can be achieved across the channel is key for us," she added. "We can support partners to build a greener industry while finding new opportunities for commercial growth."

This feeds into a larger piece around workforce engagement that Sztejka sees as critical to maintaining strong channel relationships. "I will ensure we have an engaged team that always strives to be better, partner-centric and solutions-focused," she added. "And by focusing on execution I want to enable our partners to be more successful. Trust and simplicity will remain key to success." ■

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Playing the long game pay

Comms National Awards 2024 triple winner and Reseller of the Year Uplands OneTelco CEO Paul Hooper is clear on his motivations, goals and priorities, and the measures required to align his ambitions and values with sustainable growth.

The telecoms industry is at a turning point, and those who combine innovation with sustainability and CX will lead the next wave of transformation, believes Hooper. "AI and sustainability solutions are the key trends that drive our focus on the art of the possible and greener technologies," he stated. "These areas, and the evolution of our differentiating CX level will shape our future strategy. Customer demand for value and becoming more planet focused is also influencing our work at The People's Operator. We see this proposition getting much stronger over the coming years."

As a business leader, Hooper is clear on his immediate priorities and longer-term objectives. "Let's start with what truly matters: Health, family and friends – those are non-negotiable," he said. "If you're not taking care of yourself, the people closest to you and the relationships that give life meaning, then what are you doing all this for? On a personal level, maintaining a balance and

making time for the things that fuel me outside of work is priority number one."

Turning to business, Hooper's focus is just as crystal clear. "It's about continuing to deliver what our customers need right now – we take them from where they are to where they want to be," he added. "The world of technology is moving faster than ever and with the advancements in AI it's only going to speed up. This means focusing on emerging technologies, especially IoT where we see massive potential."

"Longer term, it's about evolution, not revolution. We're looking at new ways to solve old problems, but at the core, it's always going to be about CX and putting customers first. After 45 years, you can definitely say we're playing the long game, building a company that's not just successful but sustainable for our people and the planet – all with vision and purpose."

Uplands is currently targeting key sectors like retail, manufacturing and media.



Paul Hooper

If you're not taking care of yourself, the people closest to you and the relationships that give life meaning, then what are you doing all this for?

Its strategic partnerships include VMO2, Vodafone, Gamma, Giacom, Xelion and Pangea. "Our goal is to lead in these services and solutions," added Hooper. "Future growth will also come from greater 5G deployment as well as the work we are doing on automation and integration. And there's an opportunity to add advanced service and analytics to our portfolio."

Strong pedigree

The strategic foresight displayed by Hooper was also a defining characteristic of Uplands OneTelco from the outset. The company began its commercial life in 1979 when two partners, Elwyn Jones and Tony Parker, founded the business as

Uplands Car Radios initially focused on selling car stereos. The company soon became a familiar name across Wales and the west country, providing audio solutions for vehicles. In 1985 it expanded into the telecommunications sector as a Cellnet Advance Partner, marking its first steps into mobile communications. By the 1990s Uplands had introduced prepaid mobile phones to the UK market. Then Hooper joined the firm in 1993 and quickly became involved in propelling that transformation, helping to drive the prepaid mobile phone market and working on cutting-edge projects like satellite navigation systems for major clients, including the NHS and Blue Light Services.

"This blend of hands-on experience with emerging technologies and a deep commitment to customer-focused solutions laid the foundation for my role today as CEO of Uplands OneTelco," he stated. "I draw on those experiences daily and always have a focus on making technology simple and accessible to empower growth."

It was back in 2008 when Hooper became MD and purchased the company. "Deciding to buy the business when I had little to no experience and absolutely no cash in the bank was a big risk," he stated. "I had to remortgage my house and commit to working tirelessly to make it succeed. Knowing

...s off for Hooper

that everything was on the line for something I believed in forced me to focus all my attention and energy. It was a huge leap of faith, but that level of risk really drives you to push beyond your limits and make things happen."

Just one month after Hooper acquired Uplands the global financial crisis hit and to say the impact was an exacting personal test for Hooper would be to greatly understate the trial that lay ahead of him. "That was a challenge, not just of the business but of me personally," he added. "We could have crumbled but instead we doubled down, adapted and pushed through. I genuinely enjoy taking on new challenges and believe in throwing myself fully into everything I do, whether it's work or personal pursuits. I have a passion for learning and growth and take pride in continuously honing my skills."

Another major milestone was reached when Uplands sold its car audio division which, as mentioned, had been part of the company from the start. "We had to focus all our efforts on the telco industry," stated Hooper. "That move allowed us to fully commit to becoming one of the UK's leading B2B and enterprise comms providers. Looking ahead, I want Uplands OneTelco to be known more for what we are now, a customer focused telco partner with a boutique approach and the reach of a giant punching well above our weight. We'll get there by scaling strategically, leveraging our partnerships, respecting our people, our planet and our customers – and by having lots of fun along the way." ■

Just a minute with Paul Hooper...

Role model: My dad, who I sadly lost when I was in my 20s, but he made the biggest impact on my life. He was a hard working, loving and caring individual with a great sense of humour. He taught me the importance of knowing right from wrong, being honest and always treating people with respect. His influence continues to guide me every day.

Your main strength and what could you work on? My vision and leadership are strong, but I need to work on delegating more.

Three ideal dinner guests: Elon Musk for his innovation and to find out what he is really like. David Attenborough, why wouldn't you? He and I went head-to-head a few years ago for a sustainability in tech award – he won of course. And my wife Sophie, she is my perfect dinner date.

If you weren't in ICT what would you be doing? I spent a lot of my youth surfing on the Cornwall and north Devon coast and always had a dream of owning a surf shack, selling coffees and renting surfboards. That would have been a perfect alternative path for me.

What do you fear most? Stagnation and complacency, they kill growth.

What talent do you wish you had? I play the guitar and piano and wish I could take my musical abilities to the next level.

The biggest risk you have taken: Buying the business when I had little to no experience and absolutely no cash in the bank.

Tell us something about yourself we don't know: I am a 5th Degree Taekwondo Martial Arts and personal self-defence instructor. I have my own school and train about 40 students twice a week.

Your biggest career achievement: Building Uplands OneTelco into a multi-award winning company while maintaining a focus on our customers.

One example of something you have overcome: I worked hard to overcome my discomfort with heights by pushing myself into situations outside my comfort zone. A prime example was when I abseiled down Avon Gorge in Somerset for a press release while wearing a business suit and carrying a briefcase.

In hindsight: I'd probably have taken bigger risks to accelerate growth earlier.

How do you relax? Spending time with my family, walking the dog, seeing to the chickens, playing guitar and hitting people at Taekwondo!

Your favourite comedian and comedienne? Josh Pugh and Katherine Ryan are ace.

Best piece of advice you've been given: Always have vision and purpose – and mind the gap.

What are today's leadership priorities? First and foremost I am here to provide the team with vision and purpose. Innovation, agility and people-focused leadership are also priorities. Being fast is important... get it done, don't hang around. Continued success comes from empowering teams, adapting to change and staying customer-focused all the time.

Industry bugbear: We need to focus more on sustainability by pushing for greener technologies and making refurbished devices more mainstream. And we need to talk in plain English – drop the jargon and acronyms.

Top tip for resellers: Focus on your customer, build long-term relationships, never get complacent, be honest and reliable.



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Marke on how to build value

Giacom has doubled down on helping partners boost their valuations by turning top line growth into profit, EBITDA and cashflow, according to COO Nathan Marke.

Speaking at Giacom's MSP Cloud Live event (14th November, Code Node, London) Marke emphasised that top line growth alone no longer guarantees a strong valuation for MSP businesses. "Investors are now looking at the quality of your revenue," he said. "As MSPs you're well positioned to create sticky partnerships that make for healthy and high growth business cases."



Nathan Marke

Setting market trends against this valuation challenge, Marke explained the foundations of Giacom's evolving strategy which is to help partners differentiate, adopt subscription models and boost their operational efficiencies. He identified high growth markets and especially highlighted the business software opportunity which is worth \$11.3 billion (Analysys Mason), with 11.6 per cent CAGR over the next four years. "If your business isn't leading with software you aren't going to get high growth," added Marke.

Giacom's acquisition of intY at the end of last year was designed to further help MSPs leverage SaaS opportunities where growth is mostly driven by subscription-based services, with a 12.7 per cent CAGR. "This is in line with a bigger shift towards

the subscription economy," added Marke. "Converting one-off projects into subscription-based services will improve your cashflow."

This was key to Giacom's acquisition of Inform Billing, helping MSPs migrate to subscription-led business models. A secondary growth area identified by Marke was infrastructure, specifically compute and storage (IaaS). He commented: "Get on this bandwagon because it is a huge opportunity to grow."

Cybersecurity

Marke also identified cybersecurity and AI as being top of mind for UK SMBs, enabling the channel to build profitable managed services. And he warned MSPs not to forget about telco. "All of these as-a-service workloads are growing and boosting your top line, but the margins are slim," added Marke. "To

build that positive revenue growth you need to pull together these products with managed services and wrap it around software. Doing this differentiates your business and takes things off the table from competitors."

Giacom is continuing to evolve its B2B channel-only Cloud Market platform to make the cross selling and bundling process easier for partners. Marke also discussed Giacom's Cloud Market Tools offering which aims to help MSPs boost operational efficiency to achieve profit growth. He said: "As MSPs you are being asked increasingly to provide broader, deeper and more complex solutions to customers. This is going to be hard unless you place tools such as AI and automation at the centre of your business to drive efficiency in your business models."

Partners given portfolio boost

Onecom Partners is giving traditional resellers a leg up to portfolio expansion and managed services following a new agreement with Vodafone and the launch of an enhanced front-facing portal.

In a business update Onecom Partners Managing Director Adam Cathcart told Comms Dealer that the OneHub portal will enable resellers to address mobile opportunities and bundle services such as UCaaS, CCaaS and security. "Our key focus is to help partners open new revenue streams with value-added services that differentiate and provide value to their customers," stated Cathcart.



Adam Cathcart

Mobile remains at the core of Onecom Partners' offering and makes up approximately 20 per cent of its total partner revenue, up from 1.5 per cent in its former days as 9 Group. "We still see mobile as central to our partner business, but it's not just a commodity service," added Cathcart. "There's a real value-add for teams to gain access to the fundamental applications that end customers utilise seamlessly from anywhere. We are focused on making sure resellers are geared up to support clients in providing the right tariffs and products for that customer, making sure that they can construct a pricing structure that works most effectively for them to do that."

Key to this strategy has been a new agreement with

Vodafone to access bespoke tariffs from 2GB to unlimited data. According to Cathcart, these packages make up around 75-80 per cent of connections on its base. "This means the deals we have done are constructed around the tariffs we are selling the most of," he added.

Portal power

OneHub replaces the product inherited from the 9 Group acquisition and is the new interface for partners transacting with the company. The first offering launched through the portal was Onecom Partners' SIP proposition. This will be shortly followed by the new Vodafone Business proposition.

Cathcart added: "There's a fantastic opportunity to give partners access to a

wide portfolio as we add to the OneHub family of products, not only offering a full stack of comms services but introducing new value-added services such as UCaaS, CCaaS and cyber that partners can wrap around and bundle to transform how they transact with their customers. This all supports our strategy of helping traditional resellers to become technology businesses.

"Since the Onecom acquisition we have also prioritised providing partners with choice across all our product sets. We are agnostic and understand that not one service works for all our partners or their customers. Whether it is price of functionality led, we want partners to have access to services that work for them." ■

Giving back at Sky

At Sky, we believe businesses have a real part to play in building stronger, more connected communities and in giving back to those who need it most. As we approach the festive season, it's a perfect time to reflect on how we can support those who could use it most.



Damian Saunders, Managing Director; Sky Business Hospitality, Mid-Market & Wholesale

Sky Business is driven by a commitment to making a positive impact. Over the past year, we've had the opportunity to get involved in The Big Goal, an initiative run by the Street Soccer Foundation. This impactful program aims to transform the lives of homeless young people through mentorship, training, and support. As one of the founding members of the initiative, Sky Business has invested in helping to drive this effort forward and we continue to use our platform to amplify the initiative's reach and visibility. We want to encourage others in the channel to get involved and play their part in helping to tackle youth homelessness.

In 2019, we launched Sky Cares, our company-wide volunteering program, which empowers our employees to give back on company time. Through Sky Cares, we've established partnerships with charities across the UK, supporting their individual missions not only with time and resources but also by raising awareness. To date, our employees have dedicated 263,000 hours of volunteer service – meeting our 2025 target of 250,000 hours 6 months early. Among their achievements, our teams have picked up over 14,000 pieces of litter from UK beaches and rivers,

contributing to a cleaner environment for future generations.

This time of year can be especially challenging for those who feel alone. Sky is committed to helping tackle loneliness through our Time to Care programme led by our customer service teams. According to Age UK, 1.4 million people over 65 in the UK struggle with loneliness, this initiative allows our 1,000 Time to Care volunteers to dedicate an hour each week to chat with an elderly customer. Through over 3,000 conversations a month, our volunteers provide a listening ear, emotional support, and sometimes, a critical connection for those at risk of isolation. To extend this impact, we launched our Community Grant Fund which annually contributes up to £120,000 to local charities.

We're incredibly proud of the journey we've taken to make a positive impact in our communities – from small acts to big initiatives – but we're constantly inspired to keep finding new ways to reach even more people.

For more information visit: <https://www.skygroup.sky/impact/giving-back>

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Digging deep into altnet

Megabyte Chief Analyst Philip Carse digs deep into the latest FTTP and altnet market developments and with a scientific eye provides important insights into how this key segment is shaping up.

The last three months has been another interesting and evolving period for UK fibre altnets, the main headline being Sky's new partnership with CityFibre. Otherwise, sorting the wheat from the chaff is ongoing, with new debt raises for Netomnia, Community Fibre, Fibrus and Ogi (mainly public money), while Spring Fibre is going through a pre-pack administration/sale to Harmony Networks. A lack of M&A/consolidation this quarter is surely temporary given the tough environment (a strong BT, ambitious VMO2, funding challenges/interest rates, cost inflation etc) with many altnets rethinking their rollout and go to market strategies. More commercially successful altnets are now adding up to 1pp of customer penetration per month.

Developments in the last quarter include Openreach setting the pace. The September 2024 quarter saw a record Openreach performance in terms of premises upgraded (1,086k) and FTTP subscribers added (446k), to 15.9m and 5.53m respectively for a 34.8% penetration rate, versus BT's premises target of 25m by end 2026. It increased FY25 upgrade targets by 0.2m to 4.2m premises within the same capex budget. Meanwhile, VMO2 is maintaining the pace, adding 281k full fibre premises via nexfibre, just

off Q4 23 and Q2 24 levels (295-298k) and helped by the first Upp integrations, taking full fibre to 5.6m of its 17.8m premises.

Altnets are gaining ground with Openreach and VMO2 collectively losing 165k broadband subscribers (of all flavours) in the September quarter, a decent proxy for altnet gains, but down on Q2's record 208k losses. Annualised, this is just 3% of the incumbents' bases. The last quarter also saw CityFibre sign up major ISP Sky as a partner. Sky is likely to favour CityFibre wholesale over Openreach where available (lower cost and better, symmetric, product), but CityFibre has had to commit to reaching 8m premises – which will require new funding – and a rapid and full roll out of XGS-PON.

Despite a tough funding environment, some altnets are still raising new debt. Most comes from public sources – the National Wealth Fund/formerly UK Infrastructure Bank providing £55m of £100m for Fibrus and £25m for Netomnia, and Cardiff Capital Region providing £45m to Ogi, while Community Fibre raised £125m from five private banks. On the flip side, Spring Fibre is the latest altnet to fail, being sold for £1.5m to Harmony Networks (backed by network constructor SDC), having spent £37m on 12k premises passed.



Philip Carse

The FTTP outlook remains challenging given a tough macro environment for altnets resulting in distressed situations, consolidation and tweaked or rewritten business plans

Here's a snapshot of more new data from Megabyte...
Roll out: It is estimated that altnet premises passed numbers circa 16.5m (CityFibre 3.8m), up from 14.9m last quarter. This compares with Openreach's 15.9m upgraded premises (Sept 2024) and VMO2's 5.6m upgrade/new build FTTP (out of 17.8m). Annualised build rates are led by BT's 4.2m (up

0.2m), Netomnia's 1.2m and VMO2's 0.85 (which includes Upp integrations).

Spend: The altnets had collectively spent £8.5bn Gross Book Value as of latest accounts (versus £7.5bn last quarter); we estimate this is now £9.1bn+.

Customers: Openreach has 5.5m FTTP customers (across BT Retail and ISPs such as

Sky, Vodafone and TalkTalk) versus 1.99m combined altnet customers (1.96m last quarter), led by CityFibre (400k) and Hyperoptic (340k). Some altnets have yet to report customer numbers with circa 10k a typical reportable milestone.

Cumulative cost per premise passed: This ranges from circa £2,000 for early stage altnets and Gigaclear (£1,803,

t territory

rural focus) to £543 for Community Fibre (London focus) to £460 for Hyperoptic (MDU focus) and £303 for brsk. Openreach quotes the lower end of £250-350 for its upgrade though reported capex implies more like £475 all-in (FY24).

ARPU: There are few data points but ARPU are typically in the £25-£40 per month altnet retail range (lower for wholesale); with a variety of inflation-

Whether investors will recoup their money in the inevitable consolidation remains to be seen

driven price rise strategies, from zero to single digit (eg Gigaclear 5%) to CPI+ double digit (eg BT, VMO2).

Business models: Most altnets are unsurprisingly EBITDA loss-making and heavily cash consuming. They are now focused on cash preservation/breakeven through improving marketing and sales resources and build optimisation/pause.

Asset turnover: Altnet commercialisation ranges from 15% for Hyperoptic (well established, MDU focus) to 2% for G.Network, compared with BT Group on 35%. FWA players score well though shifts to FTTP once critical mass is achieved will dilute their ratios.

Implied payback periods: Based on CPPP, penetration and ARPUs payback periods range from 80-90 months for toob, Community Fibre

and Hyperoptic to 250 for Gigaclear and >1,000 (>80 years!) for G.Network.

Customer additions: The latest subscriber data suggests altnets can add up to 1pp of penetration per month.

Outlook
The FTTP outlook remains challenging given a tough macro environment for altnets (consider cost inflation, higher interest rates, constrained new funding) resulting in distressed situations, consolidation, and tweaked or rewritten business plans, with a clear shift for most from network build and land grab to adding customers (with the obvious

exception of Netomnia which is doing both). For some, there is a clear path to cash flow breakeven (helping attract new debt funding), though whether investors will recoup their money in the inevitable consolidation remains to be seen.

There is plenty of M&A being discussed (the latest rumour is Zzoomm/Freedom Fibre, but many combos would have strategic merit). The challenge is agreeing all-paper deals that work for all parties. In the meantime, Openreach continues to upgrade its network (at ever falling costs) and customers (retail and wholesale) to FTTP to secure medium term FCF gains; while VMO2/nexfibre will continue to undertake new FTTP build and upgrade the cable network while evaluating M&A opportunities.

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Cellular comes of age, says

Economic disruption is inevitable but few saw the 2008 crash coming and few realised that the way business leaders reacted would come to define them. Comms365 CEO Mike van Bunnens is among these steadfast entrepreneurs, his resilience strengthened by an unwavering belief in the power of cellular.



Mike Van Bunnens

When a crisis hits an organisation in the face its response is critical to survival and in Comms365's case that meant taking determination and resiliency to the next level. The company began life in 2008 just as the global economic meltdown erupted and battening down the hatches quickly became the order of the day. "Our plans took a bashing but we didn't give in," stated van Bunnens. "I'd thrown my life savings, and more, into setting up the business. I had to give it a go."

Comms365 was established when van Bunnens and his business partner Shaun Nicholls, who at the time worked together at Pipex, saw an emerging market opportunity within the comms and mobile data sector. "Armed with little more than savings and ideas

we started the business determined to create a wireless ISP selling managed remote cellular connectivity," explained van Bunnens. "With no 4G and only patchy 3G available it was risky."

The company's first large scale proof of concept was a private 3G network for a global lighting company, but the project was shelved as the economy spiralled downwards. "A few months later we were contacted by a potential partner needing a 3G connection to get a transport project over the line," added van Bunnens. "That ended up being 50 connections, routers, a private APN and NNIs all delivered within four weeks. Word got around that we could deliver under pressure and more opportunities started to appear."

Another turning point came when van Bunnens was

The great thing about cellular services is that they are finally, after 16 years, becoming more mainstream

approached by a consultant working on behalf of a large retailer that needed pop-up shop connectivity. "We are now in our 14th year of working with them," he commented. "The third watershed moment was when a partner asked us to help them with a huge global eCommerce customer that needed rapid connectivity to open their distribution warehouses. Our services were particularly useful during the Covid years."

Nowadays, noted van Bunnens, there is so much noise it is challenging to see the developments that are really going to make a difference. "But you have to keep innovating," he added. "We're concentrating our efforts on a number of strategic products and services and preparing the right level of technical investment. For example, we have a couple of product launches in the new year that will help our partners win

more long-term business. We're also innovating the next version of our portal, streamlining our operations, evaluating sales processes and the team, introducing more detailed training and ensuring the structure of the business is ready for growth in a way that makes working with us easy."

Comms365 remains a cellular specialist, but most people are not aware that it also has a full ISP core network

ys van Bunnens

including fixed line services. "We still own tin in real DCs," added van Bunnens. "Of course, we also take advantage of cloud-based networks like IBM and AWS for distributed services, but we're an engineering firm at heart and those customers who have worked closely with us know that because we own our network assets, we have a lot of flexibility about how we deliver services. This is particularly useful for complex solutions that just won't work with a standard off-the-peg service."

Growing demand

Comms365's partners operate in many verticals, including CCTV, security, retail, distribution, construction, government and education. "The great thing about cellular services is that they are finally, after 16 years, becoming more mainstream," stated van Bunnens. "Everyone wants to get involved with cellular (or IoT), but it will be interesting to see who the long-termers will be. We've been doing this for 16 years, learning our trade, and there are lots of new players who haven't had that experience. We're interested in their longevity given the vast numbers having a go. Therefore our biggest opportunity is to use our experience and help others benefit from that."

Van Bunnens' industry experience stretches back a long way. Although he studied law and marketing at university his first job was in sales for a software company specialising in payroll and HR. "That role introduced me to technology and I saw first-hand how quickly the industry would evolve having also worked with mainframes and then

Just a minute with Mike van Bunnens

Your main strength and what could you work on? Multi-tasking is a strong point. On the flip side I could work at not having so much on the go at the same time.

Three ideal dinner guests: Eddie Van Halen, my music idol; Ryan Reynolds, such a funny guy; and Jack Reacher (even though he's not real and a man of few words).

If you weren't in ICT what would you be doing? A career in music, playing or producing.

Your favourite comedians and comedienesses? Sean Lock was a genius, Katherine Ryan and Richard Prior.

One thing that motivates you? Fear of failure.

Tell us something about yourself we don't know: I always wanted to be a famous drummer in a rock band.

Your biggest career achievement: Building a successful company and keeping on going at the beginning when it looked like we had bitten off more than we could chew.

What couldn't you do without in your job? The Internet.

One example of something you have overcome: Setting up a business when the financial markets went into meltdown.

In hindsight: I would have made certain decisions faster and followed my gut more. I would have also probably taken a few more risks.

How do you relax when not working? Playing the drums, walking my dogs and seeing friends.

Best piece of advice you've been given: Know when to walk away. Not all deals are good deals.

Industry bugbear: Racing to the bottom too quickly to win business leads to a rapid under valuation of the actual work being done. This conditions the market to expect everything at low cost.

What are today's leadership priorities? Leaders have to listen to their teams, lead from the front, be firm but fair and approachable. They have to be visible and also show they care about the business and their customers or partners.

If you were to write a book, what would it be about? A travel guide, and I'd have to go out and do a lot of research for it.

What are you most looking forward to? More time with my family.

If you were to be reincarnated, what in living nature would you like to come back as? A dog – they have the best life.

Top tip for resellers: There is room for more than one vendor or supplier. Having choice enables you to build more robust solutions as each supplier brings a set of skills and services which combined can put you in a position of strength.

PCs," he commented. "I then left software for the Internet and joined an exciting venture that created four page websites for £19.99 per month in 1999. I ran the channel team who door knocked day in, day out, trying to convince business owners that if they

didn't have a website they would lose business. We were very early to the market but the experience gave me the technical knowledge I needed to move to Cable&Wireless. At that point I became fully immersed in everything Internet. The rest is history."

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Understanding today's m

How channel firms market products and solutions and target customers is undergoing a transformation that requires immediate attention, and according to experts at last month's Channel Forecast insight session it demands an agile response that balances human-first data-driven strategies with personalisation, differentiation, unity of voice and ongoing learning.

When it comes to marketing, too many channel companies find themselves in a catch-22 that leads to inaction, but without a modern day marketing strategy it's a challenge to maximise the value they can deliver, and grow as a result. "The challenge every business faces is that they move from one priority to the next and marketing slips down the priority list," stated Roan Pratt, Partner Sales Director, Onecom Partners. "It falls on our shoulders to inform partners about new ways of marketing, the tools we have and follow up on what worked, what didn't and how we can do it better. Agile marketers who continuously learn will rise to the top."

According to Candice Cunliffe, Managing Director, F6 Agency, many partners understand the value of marketing but don't fully leverage the resources at their disposal. "The old school mentality of using white label documents is great, but working collaboratively enables you to unlock more tailored, impactful marketing," she said. "There are key insights and information on customers to leverage, along with a better understanding of how various channels like webinars, sales toolkits, marketing playbooks and a range of other

resources can help resellers. Understanding where to target and inject energy is also vital, along with the right granular information that shows proven results."

The evolution of marketing has seen a wave of digital innovation that does not simply intervene with traditional approaches but threatens to remove the human element. A balanced and integrated use of technologies like AI must be based on the right priorities, noted Cunliffe.

"We're exploring AI driven market segmentation and personalisation," she said. "There are so many segments in the telecoms space it's important to utilise these tools but in a way that complements the human element and brand tone. Modern tools must retain the brand's unique personality and it's essential they are leveraged alongside traditional methods of speaking to customers. At the end of the day they are humans, not robots."

Cunliffe believes that AI and tools like ChatGPT are going to transform market research and content creation. She is already seeing the speed and scale that customer insights can be gathered in real-time. "ChatGPT and AI can help with automating but



Candice Cunliffe

achieve marketing success through technology that complements human-first strategies and promotes relevancy. "ChatGPT and AI can help accelerate learning and perhaps some of our GTM," he said. "But marketing is about what's relevant to your audience and the human element is crucial. We're at a point where you can tell if something has been written by ChatGPT – then you lose interest because there is no personal touch. Embrace such tools but add the human side and understand what the customer requires."

The number of different ways to target audiences seems to be growing almost by the day, and a big challenge facing marketers is to ensure that personalisation remains a priority in all marketing plans. "The shift towards personalisation is a key trend and marketers are using customer data more than ever to deliver targeted experiences," added Cunliffe. "We harness those insights to shape customer value propositions as well as customised content pieces. AI driven tools enable greater efficiency and precision when targeting."

Ensuring that personalisation remains front and centre while being compatible with the rise of AI and

Maintaining the focus on building relationships over driving volume is key

in terms of content creation through AI tools we're seeing a relentless lift and shift mentality in the market," she said. "You have to maintain the client's unique tone, voice and brand personality otherwise everyone will sound the same and there will be no differentiation. Authenticity is what differentiates companies."

Differentiation begins with brand identity and clear messaging, while working closely with customers identifies what's unique

about their value proposition and helps them stand out, stated Cunliffe. "In terms of demand generation we're seeing a lot of success with account-based marketing and doing strategic content campaigns that target decision makers through personalisation while aligning with partner goals," she added. "Maintaining the focus on building relationships over driving volume is key."

According to Pratt, it is more important than ever to

marketing trends

the broadening range of customer touchpoints is vital, agreed Pratt. "We are seeing growth in digital channels and data-driven marketing across different routes to market, whether online, email, LinkedIn or Instagram for example," he added. "There are many ways to reach a target audience and they require personalised approaches. You need to make sure you incorporate those differences into channel marketing."

This also points to another issue surrounding marketing – the requirement for consistency, observed Cunliffe. "The importance of consistency in branding and communication cannot be overstated," she said. "Marketing success requires clear and cohesive messaging across all touch points. There are multiple areas where customers will come to your business so you need to be consistent across everything to deliver clarity and authenticity in messaging. It's also about aligning leadership and teams to understand where the value of marketing sits."

That all the factors discussed in this article are interconnected becomes more obvious when we consider that the key to success lies ultimately in clarity and unified customer-centric messaging, translating complex concepts into relatable terms that resonate with the target audience. "It's the value of specific outcomes rather than features which is key," said Cunliffe. "But the main challenge we see with clients in this industry is the wide range of services and solutions, with companies not always fully understanding



Roan Pratt

Agile marketers who continuously learn will rise to the top. It's about ongoing education and understanding

how they benefit end users. This understanding is crucial. F6 bridges this gap by articulating value and enabling partners to do so through education and tailored marketing support."

Partnerships

The channel's marketers must also respond to an accelerating technology environment and Pratt underscored the growing importance of partnerships in overcoming marketing challenges. "The landscape is evolving so fast it's important to help partners and customers understand products and emerging technologies," he added.

"From a channel perspective this means partner enablement. We have to educate partners on the end user benefits and

different marketing methods and use simple customer-centric language that talks plainly about three golden nuggets that catch a broad range of pain points – then go into more detail while keeping it simple."

Cunliffe also emphasised that a winning marketing team needs to be founded on cross-functional collaboration, agility, continual learning and a strong grasp of technology. "Staying up-to-date with how marketing is innovating and how storytelling is evolving is key," she commented. "To enable this we make sure there is cross functional collaboration across companies and continuous learning from each other and the market, while leveraging new tools that help us strategise to meet market trends."

PXC

PXC from a partner's perspective

Gradwell Communications has been an active participant in PXC's Partner Programme since its inception a year and a half ago and has since increased its spend with the vendor by 80%. Here CPO Darren Standing explains how the partnership has enabled Gradwell Communications to drive growth in both its direct and indirect channels.



Darren Standing

enabled us to work directly with them, supporting them as they go to market."

According to Standing, the partnership resembles more of a strategic relationship, compared to other alliances which feel overly transactional. "Ultimately, we're not treated like a just another partner," he said. "The programme gives us the ability to have a personalised approach to doing business with PXC, which means we can take advantage of what works for us, without being penalised for not engaging with things that don't work for us."

The relationship kicked off with Gradwell Communications seeking a partner to assist with the rollout of a multi-site opportunity for an expanding global food delivery business. Standing said: "We started at a relatively low level in terms of the spend but our base subsequently grew following an acquisition and in turn, so did our relationship with PXC."

"In the last 12-18 months, collaborating closely with PXC has helped us win more technically complex opportunities, accessing opportunities that deliver higher revenue and higher margin, which is really positive for us."

"Being so close as partners also means that, if there's an emerging opportunity for another product or service that PXC is offering, we can collaborate closely and quickly if we see the opportunity in our customer base arise."

Gradwell Communications also has a large base of partners which bring a new set of demands. "A robust rebate scheme offered by PXC has helped us on this front by bringing us closer to partners," said Standing. "It has helped us deliver extra value to our to our channel partners, and

"Our partnership with PXC has undeniably had a positive impact," finished Standing. "It has driven positive results in what we're delivering to our customers and also across what we're able to generate as a result in our own business."

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Onecom Partners - Transf

Onecom Partners has always been focused on delivering exceptional value to its partners. As part of the Onecom Group, Onecom Partners leverages the group's scale, relationships with suppliers and extensive industry experience to offer competitive rates, an expanded choice of products and services, and enhanced support.

Adam Cathcart, Managing Director of Onecom Partners, noted that being part of the Group has strengthened our relationships with key suppliers, such as Vodafone Business, enabling our partners to have access to a wider range of services. Our strategic partnership with Vodafone encompasses wholesale and distribution of mobile airtime, SIP, connectivity and IoT.

To deliver this, Onecom Partners has created a single portal, known as OneHub, where partners can benefit from key features that support efficiently onboarding customers, streamlined service provisioning and robust in-life management. The portal's use of automation enhances decision-making and operational efficiency, significantly reducing processing times and enhancing service quality.

The Initial phase of the OneHub project was the

launch of the Onecom Partners' SIP solution earlier in 2024. This launch provided partners with enhanced voice communication capabilities and streamlined service access. This next phase, API integrations have been implemented which connect Onecom Partners systems seamlessly with Vodafone's infrastructure as the company launches its exciting new Vodafone Mobile offering.

Exclusive Mobile Offering
This transformative mobile proposition will provide Onecom Partners with exclusive access to commercial tariffs which include bespoke plans ranging from 2GB to unlimited data, with the highly demand Vodafone Unlimited tariff available at just £9.95 per month on new and porting connections. This offering underscores the unique value Onecom Partners brings to its relationship with Vodafone Business.

Cathcart commented, "Mobile services are



Adam Cathcart

Our aim is to transform how our partners interact with technology, making it simpler and more profitable to deliver mobile solutions in today's dynamic digital economy.

increasingly critical as a revenue stream for our partners. With the introduction of OneHub and our exclusive Vodafone tariffs, we are elevating the partner experience by offering a sophisticated solution that merges cutting-edge technology with

comprehensive management tools." Cathcart added "This initiative is designed to streamline service provisioning and management to ensure a swift and efficient path to market. Our aim is to transform how our partners interact with technology, making it simpler and

more profitable to deliver mobile solutions in today's dynamic digital economy." This new strategic initiative not only deepens the collaborative ties with Vodafone Business but also sets a new benchmark for technological

forming the Channel

“White Horse Telecom’s customers uncompromisingly demand the best-of breed in everything we provide for them. To that end, by partnering with Onecom Partners, we’re committed to exceeding expectations and providing seamless, cutting-edge Vodafone mobile solutions. This collaboration will undoubtedly enhance our customers’ overall experience and in turn drive efficiencies into their businesses. To say we are excited to bring this new Vodafone offering to our base would be an understatement.”-

Paddy Coppinger, Director of White Horse Telecom



Once in a lifetime Partner Incentive



To get through the winter blues and following the release of their new Vodafone mobile proposition, Onecom Partners are thrilled to launch a once-in-a-lifetime incentive to Monaco. Successful partners will experience helicopter transfers to take in the stunning Cote d’Azur coastline before arriving in Monte Carlo. Whilst there they will take the wheel in classic cars to tour the spectacular roads of the French Riviera, enjoy a champagne sunset whilst sailing (or blasting) along the Mediterranean and visit the famous Hotel de Paris wine cellar.

advancement within the telecommunications sector. OneHub and the exclusive promotional mobile tariffs are a testament to Onecom Partners’ innovative approach to business solutions and their dedication to partner success in a competitive digital economy.

Onecom Partners’ channel strategy is centred around fostering strong partnerships and empowering partners

to grow their businesses. By working closely with its partners, Onecom Partners aims to deliver a comprehensive range of innovative solutions which will support its partners in transforming how they buy and sell services to their customers. In addition to providing a full stack of telecom solutions they are also enabling partners to add IT Support, UCaaS, CCaaS, Cyber and additional

support services, such as an AI-enabled meeting assistant.

By not only providing access to these wide range of services, delivered via tier-one networks and carriers but also being able to bundle the solution stack, enabling partners to open new revenue streams with transformative value-added services that differentiate and provide a true value to their customers.



To find out more about transforming your customer proposition and to register for the incentive, scan the QR code or contact the Onecom Partners team at hello@onecompartners.co.uk or by phone at 0800 068 5939.



“We’re thrilled to embark on this exciting opportunity with Onecom Partners, launching their new Vodafone proposition to our customer base. Our customers see Vodafone as the leading network in the country so by combining our strengths, we aim to deliver exceptional experiences to our customers.”

Adam Wilson, Director at IPEX Technology

A Big Goal win for Virgin M

The channel united at St George's Park for a top notch finals day at the home of England football.

A well-drilled Virgin Media Business team triumphed at the inaugural tournament of The Big Goal, beating a gallant Elite Group team 3-1 in the final.

Following regional rounds staged at Brentford FC, Sunderland AFC and Nottingham Forest FC, a total of 12 teams took part in the finals of The Big Goal which were professionally staged in the Sir Alf Ramsay Arena by The Street Soccer Foundation and main sponsor Giacom, with commentary and interviews provided by Sky Sports presenters Gary Weaver and David Craig.

Speaking after his team's triumph, Virgin Media Business team, coach Steve Round said: "We have a great set of lads who have been so looking forward to today and after our success in the regionals at Nottingham Forest we wanted to prove that we could go all the way. We showed some great team play in all our games and I'm very proud of our performances across the whole tournament. Overall, this was an amazing day. The Street Soccer Foundation team, Giacom and Sky have been brilliant, the venue was superb and 100% we'll be back again next year."

Virgin Media Business made the final with a convincing 4-0 win over Gamma. In the other semi-final Elite Group beat Wavenet 2-0.

The Big Goal is a national

award-winning campaign that uses the Global No.1 Sport and fuses it together with one of the largest Industry sectors in the UK to help tackle one of the largest social issues in the UK: youth homelessness.

Speaking at the pre-finals press conference, Nigel Sergent, Editor at Large for The Big Goal media sponsor Comms Dealer, said: "Over the last year The Big Goal has united the industry like never before, giving teams from our industry the chance to play in a brilliantly organised tournament culminating in today's final at the Home of England football. Thanks must go to The Street Soccer Foundation, Giacom, Sky Business and all the players for taking part. More importantly, I hope the professionalism of this tournament, the media exposure we have received, and the success of the academies sponsored by the teams taking part, providing them with a ready-made CSR/ESG programme, will encourage other ICT companies to get involved in The Big Goal next year."

Tez O'Brien, CEO of lead sponsor Giacom added: "In its first year The Big Goal has already helped 462 young people change their lives, but many more organisations from our industry could take part and reap a multiple of benefits. I see no reason why 100 teams could not take part next year and help over 1000 young people out of homelessness through the power of football."

THE BIG GOAL.

HEADLINE SPONSOR **GIACOM.**



Sky Sports presenter David Craig interviews the winners, Virgin Media Business



The Golden Boot winners, with eight goals apiece, were: Chris Ward, Wavenet; Dan Ellis, Virgin Media Business; Joe Hull, Elite Group; and Darren McKnight, PXC (not pictured)

THE BIG GOAL IS A READY-MADE ESG AND TEAM MOTIVATION PRO

Media and young homeless

ALL THE FINALISTS



Daisy Corporate



Elite Group



Firstcom Europe



Focus Group United



BDR Group



Wavenet



Vorboss



Winners Virgin Media Business



Gamma



PXC



Intec Group



Focus Group 2

ALL THE RESULTS

GROUP A

Focus Group Utd	1	PXC	3
Vorboss	4	Intec Group	0
Gamma	1	Elite Group	0
Vorboss	2	Focus Group Utd	0
PXC	3	Gamma	1
Elite Group	7	Intec Group	0
Focus Group United	2	Gamma	3
Elite Group	1	Vorboss	1
Intec Group	2	PXC	3
Elite Group	4	Focus Group Utd	3
Gamma	2	Intec Group	0
PXC	1	Vorboss	1
Intec Group	3	Focus Group Utd	4
PXC	1	Elite Group	2
Gamma	2	Vorboss	1

GROUP B

Daisy Corporate	0	Firstcom Europe	2
BDR Group	0	Wavenet	1
Focus Group	1	Virgin Media Business	3
Wavenet	5	Daisy Corporate	0
Firstcom Europe	0	Focus Group	0
Virgin Media Business	3	BDR Group	2
Focus Group	3	Daisy Corporate	4
Virgin Media Business	0	Wavenet	0
Firstcom Europe	1	BDR Group	2
Daisy Corporate	1	Virgin Media Business	3
BDR Group	4	Focus Group	0
Firstcom Europe	0	Wavenet	3
BDR Group	2	Daisy Corporate	1
Virgin Media Business	4	Firstcom Europe	1
Wavenet	6	Focus Group	0

SEMI-FINALS

Gamma	0	Virgin Media Business	4
Wavenet	0	Elite Group	2

FINAL

Virgin Media Business	3	Elite Group	1
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NATIONAL CHAMPIONS – Virgin Media Business

NATIONAL RUNNERS UP – Elite Group

PLAYER OF THE TOURNAMENT – Dan Ellis (on behalf of Virgin Media Business)

GOLDEN GLOVES WINNER – Tom Southam, Wavenet

GOLDEN BOOT WINNERS – Dan Ellis, Virgin Media Business; Joe Hull, Elite Group; Darren McKnight, PXC; Chris Ward, Wavenet



Sky Sports commentator Gary Weaver chats to runners-up Elite Group

CESS. SIGN UP NOW! EMAIL nsergent@bpl-business

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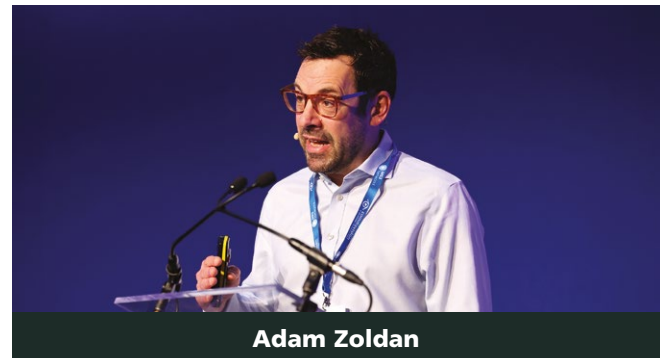
Channel poised for M&A uptick

In his keynote address to delegates at this year's Comms Vision conference Knight Corporate Finance Director Adam Zoldan reported that M&A in the comms sector remains active despite high interest rates and an uncertain economy. Here's more...

Although not a showstopper for acquisitions in the comms sector, interest rates have nevertheless had an impact on deal numbers and their value, but Zoldan says the appetite for PE firms to invest is still sharp. "PE deals have driven consolidation and we have seen no reduction in their desire to invest," he said. "This amazing dynamic channel has rolled with the punches and evolved."

Market conditions have however led to lower levels of SBO activity over the past year, creating a pent-up pipeline that Zoldan expects to unblock over the coming months. "Secondary buyouts have dipped with only one in the comms sector during the past 12 months (Focus Group)," stated Zoldan. "I suspect others are in progress but have not made it through because of higher interest rates which has increased pressure on the sector. With some fine tuning they can get ready for sale so we expect the number of secondary buyouts to increase."

Zoldan also noted that, in the main, acquisition war chests are based on debt,



Adam Zoldan

This amazing dynamic channel has rolled with the punches and evolved.

which means that equity has got smaller therefore some investors are holding off from selling. But smaller deals are progressing at circa 20 a month, observed Zoldan, noting that high interest rates are having less of an impact at this level. "It's been an interesting and positive year with plenty of funding and we see the debt markets opening up," added Zoldan. "There remains a good pool of buyers and we continue to create competition for the best deal. Buyers are more selective but the best deals are getting higher valuations."

Other macro factors identified by Zoldan include Budget changes which he says impact the value of smaller deals by a multiple of one. But overall he says

the outlook for M&A in the sector is positive with 'plenty of funding'.

While Zoldan expects an upswing in comms sector dealmaking he also pointed to an increase in the due diligence load. "Buyers check absolutely everything which adds weeks to the execution phase," he added.

The value drivers continue to be company size and growth, while recurring revenues are 'extremely important', noted Zoldan. "Being narrow and able to articulate what a reseller does quickly, and not be a jack of all trades is key," he added. "When you go to market ensure that every aspect of your business carries value."

See pages 27-37 for the full Comms Vision Special Report

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COMMS VISION CONVENTION 2024

THE NETWORK SUMMIT FOR ICT CHANNEL LEADERS

CONFERENCE REPORT Pages 27-37



Remodelling technology and GTM planning

This year's gold standard Comms Vision Convention (6th-8th November, Gleneagles Hotel) doubled down on the technology drivers transforming the channel's portfolios alongside how go-to-market (GTM) and revenue models are evolving – and what this all means for MSPs' strategic planning.

Strategic snapshots reveal the bigger picture	28-29
MSP leaders underscore strategies for long-term growth	30-31
Maximising MSP sales and marketing potential	32-33
Navigating the complex technology landscape	34-36
Comms Vision 2024 in pictures	37

Strategic snapshots reveal

A series of snapshot strategic interviews with figureheads from Comms Vision Platinum sponsors underscored the expanding role of collaboration in the channel, especially evident in a sharper focus on technology partnerships and a more considered approach to reseller and MSP engagement.

The first Comms Vision insight session brought to the surface key themes including a new clarity of strategic intent which could signal the evolution of a channel ecosystem characterised by closer working relationships as a route to growth. Gavin Jones, Channel Director, BT Wholesale, emphasised that partner growth is not simply about pushing out products but achieved through closer engagement with partners via, for example, insight events. He describes these conferences as a new approach to 'working together'. "Partner events enable customers to empower their growth, fuelled by insights into areas such as marketing and proposition building," he stated.

A pipeline of new propositions is also key to future success, especially around UC and collaboration within the context of a fast moving environment. "Much is happening in the market that's driving demand," added Jones. "Connectivity sits under it all. Fibre is growing exponentially and layering on AI with clear use cases for businesses will be a huge opportunity for the channel."

Jones also noted that BT invests £3.7 billion a year into its network and is focused on digital integration alongside security, where it has circa 3,000 security experts.

According to John Chester, Director of Wholesale, Fixed, Virgin Media O2 Business, helping partners as early as possible in their growth journey is key to success. He also noted that this requirement is reflected in the company's approach to partnering which has become more collaborative and selective. "We are deliberate about who we partner with," stated Chester. "We value partners who see beyond the list price of products and services, and partners who are transparent and flexible around planning and commercials in a way that drives mutual value."

Disruptive technologies

Chester also pointed up the future impact of emerging and disruptive technologies on networks, including AI and the metaverse, and the associated increase in data. He noted that many enterprises are already adopting AI

and he's witnessed significant use cases for other emerging technologies. "Investing in and upgrading our core network will ensure that the underlay is ready as we prepare and support partners for growth," he added.

Sky Business's approach to partnering is just as crystal clear, based on meaningful and purposeful collaboration which is a key theme in the industry now, explained Damian Saunders, Managing Director. In a world that's spinning faster than ever, he says business success also hinges on agility and an ability to compete within a 'new set of rules'.

Saunders also referred to a world that's 'settling down' now that major elections are over, for example. And he optimistically said that a lack of money in the general ecosystem does not necessarily mean that there can be no winners. "The winners will be characterised by strategies that bundle together easy to discover and simple to consume services that people want," he commented. Saunders also highlighted Sky Business' mission to demystify existing and



Gavin Jones: Much is happening in the market that's driving demand, and connectivity sits under it all.



John Chester: We value partners who see beyond the list price of products and services.



Damian Saunders: The winners will bundle together easy to discover and simple to consume services.

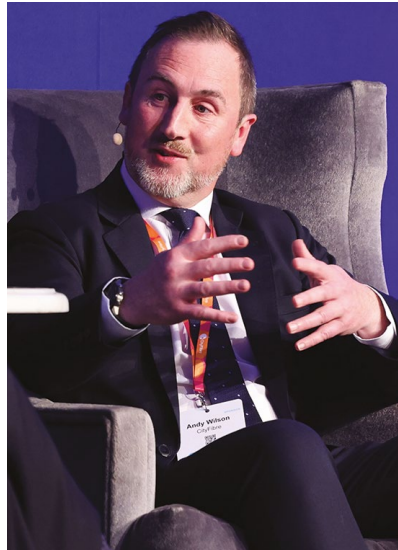


Terry O'Brien: I believe in the power of this community and see what can be achieved through unity.

Deal the bigger picture



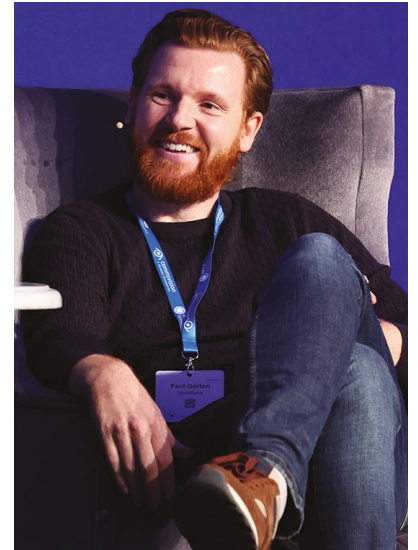
James Smith: The market is competitive and we must innovate and be easy to do business with.



Andrew Wilson: FTTP is playing a major role and the 100 meg Ethernet market is a key opportunity.



Will Morey: It all comes back to partner centricity and two-way conversations.



Paul Gorton: Some partners can't afford to grow. We want to invest cash, time and people in them.

emerging technology, and use plain words rather than acronyms that are a help to no-one.

According to Giacom CEO Terry O'Brien the rise in National Insurance paid by employers is also no help to businesses and will impact growth. He noted that the desired outcome of higher taxes on improvements to the NHS etc is commendable, but he believes the NI increase introduced during Chancellor of the Exchequer Rachel Reeves' Budget announcement is damaging to those organisations impacted by the move (it will cost Giacom circa £1 million). "There will be consequences for growth across the UK," he stated. "It will be more severe than predicted."

Strength in unity

However, O'Brien believes that the 'power of the channel when coming together' will help to offset the budget's impact. "I believe in the power of this community and see what can be achieved through unity," he added. To prove his point he cited the success of The Big Goal project which is headline sponsored by Giacom and has already seen 462 homeless young adults pass through the programme.

The channel is clearly showing a capacity for ongoing strong growth, especially spurred by industry collaborations (including CSR efforts as shown by The Big Goal success). Also contributing to the channel's high growth potential is the strategies of major aggregators, believes PXC CEO James Smith. He says PXC has a strong platform

for 'aggressive' growth and claims that the company is the only UK scale aggregator of last mile connectivity. PXC has approximately 1,000 partners on its books and according to Smith the company also has a much clearer and differentiated strategic vision. "The market is competitive and we must innovate and be easy to do business with in terms of migrations and product delivery," he stated. "These are among our top priorities."

Smith also drew attention to PXC's new Zoom relationship and that PXC has fully automated the partner end-to-end journey. "It's about being dynamic and responding to the market," he added. "The channel needs to think innovatively about FTTP and the legacy Ethernet base. Cloud and security are also priority areas for us."

In his business update, Andrew Wilson, Sales Director, CityFibre Business, reported that the altnet has reached four million premises passed and is half-way towards its eight million premises goal. He said CityFibre's acquisition strategy is also shaping up and pointed towards multi-gig services as being a game-changer in the UK market from an Ethernet perspective. "FTTP is playing a major role," he commented. "The 100 meg Ethernet market is a key opportunity."

Critical plumbing

There is a general consensus among our interviewees that the 'plumbing' plays a pivotal role in supporting ever more sophisticated products and services, and there is broad agreement that

collaborations are coming thick and fast in the connectivity and tech provider space. But building technology relationships is one thing, their scope and timing is another, according to Will Morey, Managing Director, Pragma (a Gamma business). "Timing is everything and Gamma's portfolio is the strongest it's ever been," he stated, citing especially the breadth of its UCaaS proposition and the strength of technology partnerships with Cisco, Microsoft and Ericsson-LG, as well as new security and IoT propositions.

Partner centricity

Importantly, noted Morey, Gamma's modus operandi is both approachable and practical. "It all comes back to a single relationship with Gamma, partner centricity and two-way conversations that explore how the portfolio fits with partners' strategies and growth plans," he added.

Financial and human resource support for ambitious resellers lacking the wherewithal to grow emerges as another key factor, with Paul Gorton, Business Partner Manager, Vodafone Business, explaining how the company invests in resellers as well as its network. "Some partners can't afford to grow and one of our key messages is that we want to invest cash, time and people in them," he commented. "Partners have the USPs for solution selling. As a carrier we invest in the underlying infrastructure and are focused on FTTP, 5G and UC. Partners also need to capitalise on the PSTN shut down, move more into multi-product selling and sell more volume to replace Ethernet circuits." ■

MSP leaders underscore

Striking the right balance between business transformation, portfolio expansion and future-focused go-to-market (GTM) strategies is key to securing a long-term competitive advantage, according to a Comms Vision panel of MSP business leaders.

Our panel of four high profile MSP leaders displayed a heightened focus on the requirement to truly understand the customer, with solution selling and an all encompassing GTM model dominating their current strategies and outlooks. Pete Tomlinson, CEO, Windsor Telecom, has refocused his growth plans and noted that until a strategic review was actioned the business's traditional portfolio fell short of being fit for purpose in terms of competing and driving long-term growth. "Five years ago Windsor was a single product organisation and that created challenges," he stated. "Customers love what we do but we just had one product. We were going backwards and the discussion about how to create an ecosystem of technologies that work together became critical. That starts by understanding who your customers are, knowing your market and knowing your proposition."

The need to not just evolve portfolios but also deliver a structural reinvention of GTM models was also highlighted by Vicki Rishbeth, CTO, Focus Group. "A challenge was pivoting our sales force which was traditional telco into becoming more

solutions-led, based on an understanding that you are solving a pain point for a customer and taking them on a journey," she stated. "As we became more of an MSP we also had to look at our legals. We're not selling minutes and PBXs, we're now selling security services and have to make sure we are protecting customers and ourselves. How we sell and deliver runs through the whole business."

Portfolio management

Paul Hooper, Managing Director, Uplands OneTelco, is also focused on GTM and staying ahead of the curve, and like Tomlinson he transformed his company. "We were a mobile-first business," he explained. "Mobile is still core to what we do but we now have a complete range of products and services. While you do need to widen the portfolio, don't go too wide – narrow is good, and base it on talking to your customers because they know best. Don't assume what your customer wants."

Hooper emphasised that getting close to customers has never been more important in determining the right GTM approach. This was also illustrated by Matt Parker, CEO, Babble Cloud, who pointed to a major buying trigger that must be central

to all customer engagement planning. "Money is front of mind for almost everybody – less for less, so long as it's less – this drives many of the conversations we have, along with helping organisations to understand that there's more than one route to efficiency," he stated.

Baking-in high levels of organisational agility and responsiveness is also key and is reflected in the leadership approaches adopted by Parker. "Leadership is about dealing with what's in front of you at any given time, with your style and thinking constantly changing," he said. "I've been running businesses for close to 40 years and the one thing we can be absolutely certain about is that we have no idea about what's going to happen tomorrow. The notion that you can have a single way of dealing with something that's going to last for any period of time is ridiculous. Self-reflection and learning is key."

The importance of getting to grips with the activities within your business at a granular level was emphasised by Hooper's approach to hands-on knowledge gathering and learning, which he says is an absolute priority. "In terms of my leadership approach, aside from setting vision and purpose I am the questioner," he added. "I'm the five year old kid in the room asking why are we doing things. I ask the same questions of customers... what are you trying to achieve and why? Being inquisitive is key."



If there was one thing I could get from supplier partners it would be what they think the future holds and how we will work together to deal with that

strategies for growth



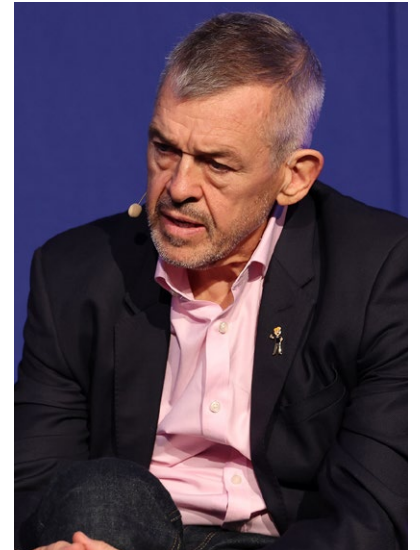
Vicki Rishbeth: We have to be clear about what we are as a company and what being an MSP means to us.



Pete Tomlinson: Too often customers come to us frustrated with their existing tech from another supplier.



Paul Hooper: While you do need to widen the portfolio, don't go too wide – narrow is good.



Matt Parker: As an industry we spend most of our time looking backwards rather than forwards.

Hooper's inquiry into the whys and wherefores extends towards how he sees and defines the business itself. "We're fundamentally a sales and service organisation and we work with technology providers – whatever the 'MSP' label," he stated. "We win customers from large organisations that provide a point product or from small IT providers where the complexity of the IT market means they can't service their customers' needs. You can have a hero product, but we're not in the world of one point products now."

Growth and forward thinking are the top considerations for Parker when it comes to defining Babble Cloud and its objectives. "What matters is whether our stakeholders – our shareholders, customers and staff – see value in what we do and who we are, not whether we're called a CSP, VAR or MSP," he commented. "Growth and being successful is what's important."

For Rishbeth, a crystal clear understanding of Focus Group's raison d'être creates a clarity of strategic vision that underpins future growth. "We have to be clear about what we are as a company and what being an MSP means to us," she added. "You also need to be clear about what you're great at and what you want to be in the future, then bring the GTM and portfolio into alignment with that view."

It is also clear that to deliver growth effectively requires close collaboration with key suppliers, pointed out Rishbeth, who called for more

insight into what's coming down the value chain pipeline. On this point she sent a clear message to partners. "I need my carriers to be transparent about their roadmaps so I can align

A challenge was pivoting our sales force which was traditional telco into becoming more solutions-led

my engineers and team and bring products and services out quickly," noted Rishbeth. "Our most successful products are the ones we can integrate well, transact and potentially automate and self-serve in the future. These products are the real game-changers and I need to know what supplier partners plan to do around automations and APIs, so I can set up our data architecture and tech stack through working together."

Forward looking focus is key

Rishbeth's call to action is reflective of how responsive organisations need to be to maximise opportunities. But the requirement to transform could be held back by too much retrospection at an industry level, believes Parker. "As an industry, one of the challenges is that we spend most of our time looking backwards rather than forwards," he stated. "We all think we're

forward looking but we're not. We're looking at what's already happening and what other people are doing. If there was one thing I could get from our supplier partners it would be what they think the future holds and how we will work together to deal with that."

Being future-focused and playing the long game is nothing new to Hooper who applies that approach to his GTM model. "Don't just go for quick wins," he said. "Talk to the customer and find out about their journey. I also like to demystify acronyms and make things simple. You have two ears and one mouth for a reason – so ask the question and listen. I see so many people just selling product, but it's important to take a long-term view, understand what customers want and understand that sometimes you may walk away without an order – but with a potential future customer."

For MSPs who don't get it right, there's little time to lose because rivals like Windsor Telecom are snapping at their heels. "Too often customers come to us frustrated with their existing technology provided by another supplier," said Tomlinson. "It's not because they have necessarily been sold the wrong thing, but it's sold and supported in the wrong way. That might be around product set up, training or simply ensuring customers are kept up to date. Supporting customers to ensure they get the most out of the products and services they buy means understanding their business and goals. Much of this comes down to your culture and brand personality." ■


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Maximising MSP sales and

Navigating today's sales and marketing competitive landscape has become a top priority and creating go to market (GTM) models that support outcome-based business goals is vital, according to a panel of Comms Vision experts who doubled down on the trend drivers reshaping the channel's GTM planning and the priority actions to be considered by MSP leaders.

GTM transformation has shot up the boardroom agenda, propelled by evolving technology adoption trends and a sharpening focus on how value is created for the channel and end user organisations. A pressing issue for MSP business leaders is how to make the most of new value creation models, and not get left behind. According to Sam Weller, Head of Wholesale Services, Sky Business, commercial and marketing leaders in the channel require a more sophisticated understanding of customer engagement and how value is created for end users, with a strong focus on measurable outcomes. "Customers want value and results, not just services, and this has changed how companies approach their sales and marketing strategies," he commented. "A key challenge is managing the shift towards outcome-based customer expectations."

Adnan Sarwar, Head of Distribution & Reseller Channel, Vodafone Business, observed that sales and marketing leaders need to be versatile if they are to effectively respond to the shift towards value-based selling. "Customers now demand solutions that deliver specific business outcomes, such as efficiency gains, cost reductions or revenue growth," he stated. "Partners must therefore transition from focusing on features to articulating the positive impact and RoI of their offerings."

Sarwar also noted that one of the key findings from Vodafone Business' Partner of the Future research was the importance of emerging tech in the minds of end users, including AI and UC. "Eighty one per cent of end users said their business interest in emerging technologies has increased in the past six months and 96 per cent said that emerging technology would be part of their company's vision of the future," he added. "Partners need to explore how emerging technologies can be emphasised in sales and marketing communications."

Focus on outcomes

Outcome-focused marketing content can be delivered through case studies, success metrics and testimonials that show measurable improvements, observed Sarwar. Approaches like these, noted Raza Baloch, Head of Business Partners, Virgin Media Business Wholesale, would also provide a counterpoint to a challenge faced by many MSPs. "The biggest challenge for sales and marketing leaders is the race to the bottom on price," stated Baloch. "We refined our GTM strategy to emphasise long-term growth over price. In 2023 we rewrote our channel strategy, leading to 40 per cent growth year-over-year."

Innovating commercial models to create customer value and stickiness is also key, with outcome and

usage-based pricing gaining traction. "Partners can explore models that tie fees to customer success," added Sarwar. "Given that end user interest in emerging tech has surged, partners could introduce pricing models that connect payments to outcomes, making investments in technology more accessible and appealing. Meanwhile, subscription and consumption-based models provide flexibility and align with customer budgets, while also promoting long-term relationships by building in consistent engagement points."

The evolving customer demand mix is forcing further change in the channel's GTM, with successful MSPs making the most of recurring revenues. "The trend towards subscription-based services is especially prominent in the UK where businesses want the flexibility to scale services up or down without heavy upfront costs," added Weller. "This approach not only reduces the burden on internal teams but also means businesses can focus on their core operations."

For MSPs seeking to transition their GTM towards today's business transformation and CX demands of end users, the question of where to target valuable resources and planning priorities is at the forefront of their minds. "If you're looking at business transformation and CX, you're looking at innovation," said Baloch. "It's vital that fear doesn't deter us from progressing. We must look forwards, create new products, new sales and marketing strategies and new partnership models. This brings its own challenges, but if we don't innovate we don't create tangible value add for our partners' long-term growth. Then we don't fulfil our purpose which is to accelerate the UK's digital economy."

Specialisation through the deployment of sector focused solutions is also becoming an important GTM differentiator, according to Weller. "Verticalisation is more critical because businesses want tailored solutions that address specific industry pain points," he explained.



and marketing potential



Sam Weller: A key challenge is managing the shift towards outcome-based customer expectations.



Raza Baloch: We must create new products, new sales and marketing strategies and new partnership models.



Adnan Sarwar: Partners can explore models that tie fees to customer success.



Andrew Wilson: It's dangerous to develop an application that fixes a single problem.

"Specialisation allows companies to build a deeper understanding of particular challenges and enables more relevant and effective solutions to be delivered. By focusing on the unique needs of different sectors we can provide solutions that not only meet technical requirements but also support the broader goals of businesses."

Differentiate through expertise

According to Vodafone Business' research, 74 per cent of end users prefer working with vendors specialising in their industry, underscoring the growing need for sector knowledge. "As businesses seek solutions tailored to their unique industry challenges, sector-specific expertise can set providers apart in a crowded market," said Sarwar. "Developing solutions for industries like healthcare, finance or retail, with specialised knowledge and compliance considerations, allows partners to target pain points more precisely. Demonstrating industry expertise can foster trust with clients, making partners more integral to their strategic initiatives and overall ecosystem."

Andrew Wilson, Sales Director, CityFibre Business, reaffirmed that customers are looking for innovative solutions, but says future success rests on striking the right balance between innovation and extending the reach of particular solutions into the wider market. "There needs to be a balance between being innovative and developing applications for particular scenarios, versus having something that's repeatable 80 per cent of the time," he stated. "It's dangerous

to develop an application that fixes a single problem, you need to find the niche and vertical to repeat that piece of development work."

How sales and marketing leaders adapt to AI, analytics and automation is another critical factor in staying competitive, believes Sarwar.

Customers want value and results, not just services, and this has changed how companies approach their sales and marketing strategies

He says advanced analytics can provide richer insights into customer behaviour, empowering more personalised and effective GTM strategies. "AI-driven insights can enable hyper-personalised marketing, aligning content and messaging with each customer's unique needs and behaviour patterns," he explained.

"At the same time, predictive sales analytics can help forecast customer needs, optimise cross-sell and upsell opportunities, and shorten sales cycles by identifying high value prospects and customising approaches. With AI, MSPs can analyse customer interactions, feedback and usage

patterns, providing data-backed insights that refine sales pitches and improve service delivery."

It is more important than ever to prioritise sustainable GTM approaches, and Baloch highlighted more key elements to be taken into account when establishing a future-ready GTM strategy. He commented: "Focus GTM resources on three areas... planning to ensure your business direction and offering is in line with customer needs, prioritise education so everyone is aligned, and focus on marketing and sales collateral so partners and customers have good reasons to believe in you and your offering."

Sarwar added that smart resource allocation is also key to the future success of the channel's sales and marketing leaders. "Focus resources on high potential industries or clients poised for transformation, and consider implementing account-based marketing strategies that align resources toward key accounts and prospects with substantial growth potential," he stated.

"ICT buyers are also increasingly influenced by ESG factors. Therefore demonstrating a strong stance on sustainability and social responsibility can enhance brand perception and appeal to these value-driven buyers, and provide MSPs with competitive differentiation. Highlighting clear metrics and goals related to ESG and CSR practices, such as carbon neutrality, diversity efforts or community engagement, adds credibility to marketing claims." ■

Navigating the complex

Having the right strategic focus on what matters most is a priority for MSPs faced with pivotal challenges such as identifying the growth drivers and technologies that will shape their future success, and where to find the biggest opportunities. Here, Comms Vision thought leaders help us understand how these market dynamics will unfold across the full spectrum of determining factors – and the implications for MSPs.

With technologies and solutions continuing to innovate, expand and grow in complexity (through the rise of software, AI and cloud for example), ensuring that MSPs set the correct course is critical to their sustainable growth. According to Nathan Marke, COO, Giacom, the channel stands to make considerable gains in three key areas... software, infrastructure and security. "Growth in SMB is coming from software and SaaS in particular," he stated. "We're seeing SaaS growing 12 per cent for the next five years. And when SMBs buy software they need good infrastructure to sit underneath it. A key opportunity for the channel is Infrastructure as a Service, it's one of the biggest markets and growing hugely. Then it's all about security. These are the three big fast growing markets, and alongside them sits the services opportunity."

Future growth will depend on two more interrelated factors, noted Andy Smethurst,

Channel Sales Director, Gamma, namely becoming a trusted partner and being smart about strategic alliances. "Advances in technology mean that the ability to offer complex solutions lower down the customer stack, and the scope for end customers to benefit, is much larger," he explained. "Therefore the opportunity for resellers to be the trusted partner for more of their customer base is higher. With this comes an enhanced requirement to reconsider solution stacks and supply chains. And to stand the test of time in terms of the pace of the market and technology evolution, resellers need to back the right horses with deep pockets that can meet the requirement for R&D."

Addressing the SMB challenge

How to accelerate technology adoption in SMB and realise the potential of available solutions remains a big question, one that needs addressing urgently says Gavin Murphy, Propositions Principal, BT Wholesale. He noted that SMB businesses can be categorised as having up to 200 employees,

and he cited a report that states the average number of dedicated IT workers among these organisations is two. "They are too busy just keeping the lights on, therefore the likelihood of these organisations adopting technologies more widely is limited," commented Murphy. "We need to make technology more accessible by simplifying the language and simplifying the use cases so IT leaders can easily understand the Rol. We need to support them because they are stretched, burnt out trying to answer phones and lead the digital transformation."

Simplifying and changing the conversation is key to breaking away from this status quo, agrees Neil Wilson, Chief Product & Marketing Officer, PXC, who highlighted the pressure on businesses to do more with less faster, and how technology is the enabler for that. "The channel needs to get into business outcome conversations rather than tech led ones," he commented. "It's about finding the technology that enables and delivers those



technology landscape



Nathan Marke: Growth in SMB is coming from software and SaaS in particular.



Andy Smethurst: The value of an MSP is to integrate solutions and attach value added services.



Gavin Murphy: We need to make tech more accessible by simplifying the language and use cases.



Neil Wilson: SMBs don't have the subject matter experts they need, which is the channel's opportunity.

outcomes. That's what customers get excited about and generates opportunities for the channel."

For Marke, the poor technology existing within many SMBs stands out as among the strongest drivers for growth, with productivity improvements being a key upside. "Everyone wants to innovate but there is a far bigger issue that has hit productivity for businesses up and down the country – poor IT," he stated. "They want great technology but don't know where to start. As an MSP you need to sell some of that innovation but the real substance of where you will get your strategic relationship is in being that workhorse that removes IT headaches and does the basics well."

As so many SMBs aren't even seeing the benefits of a basic tech upgrade, when will they be ready to adopt game-changing technology like AI? "We need to think about the reality of AI for SMBs," added Marke. "The hyperscalers are investing massively into the AI grid – £300 billion by 2028 (Gartner) – and they need a return on that investment which they won't get until SMBs start to consume it in a licence with a cost. While 80 per cent of large enterprise will adopt significant AI projects next year SMBs will not be ready to adopt. Consider PCs and cloud computing... SMBs lagged enterprises in adoption by three to five years. It's going to be all about preparation for them and the way they will consume AI will be through software applications. They'll consume it accidentally by buying a service that has AI sitting within it."

To recap: Although the impact of AI in the enterprise space is set to be a game-changer as early as next year, its transformative potential in the SMB market will be minimal, with its presence largely unseen and behind the scenes. For this reason Marke believes that the conversation should be about MSPs building out their platforms

The channel needs to get into business outcome conversations rather than tech led ones. That's what customers get excited about and generates opportunities

with AI to help improve their services. It's an approach PXC has applied to its network. "For years we were talking about CX being reactive and wanting to move to a proactive stance – with AI we can go pre-emptive, that's the next step up," he commented. "There's a huge amount of data involved in running a network and you can learn what a switch looks like before it falls over or develops a fault. Weaponising that information into usable intel that allows you to take pre-emptive steps is the next level in CX."

Having assessed the use case impact of AI in enterprise and SMB, and factoring in expected adoption rates, Murphy deduced that there's a risk of companies with large budgets and resources capitalising on AI while SMBs get left behind, and the gap between SMB and enterprise will get bigger. "The adoption lag might be ten years not three," he warned. "We need to figure out how to make AI simpler."

Harnessing the hyperscalers

Our panelists also recognise that the hyperscalers are an opportunity rather than a threat, with Smethurst saying that the channel would be wise to focus on what hyperscalers ignore as a chance to differentiate. "Lean into what they do, and lean into what they don't do," he stated. "Embrace the fact they have deep pockets to invest and create marketplaces, but they are not building solutions. The value of an MSP is to integrate the solutions that are available to them and attach value added services around the edge. So take advantage of what hyperscalers are not prepared to do."

Marke also brought into sharp focus what the hyperscalers mean for the channel community. Giacom works closely with Microsoft which launched the Azure marketplace that enables ISVs to build solutions. "There are thousands of products with great innovation but it doesn't compete in the marketplace that Giacom provides," pointed out Marke. "Our marketplace is a curated offering. Every product we put into it has a team of

Continued on page 36

**Continued from page 35**

specialist sales and support people with collateral for trading enablement. A huge amount of effort goes into launching a product into our marketplace and the channel uses our skills and expertise. You don't get any of that in an Azure marketplace. We don't see AWS, Google and Microsoft as threats. They can't deliver that curation and ability to deliver out through the channel with a tactile people-led sale, which is the only way technology gets deployed into customers."

Wilson also observed that there is plenty of viability in bringing solutions together, reflected by the contrast between selling from a book and designing real world solutions that drive value for the customer. "Having a catalogue is easy, but how does a partner on board products, support the customer and add value? That's where the curated marketplace comes in," he added. "The technology world is complex and SMBs don't have the subject matter experts they need, which is the channel's opportunity. Filling the consultancy and skills gap is critical. Engaging and building confidence in the sales team to have a tech and IT conversation and talk about business outcomes was the biggest lever-change we made. That's how you drive adoption and make money."

According to Murphy, the hyperscalers have enabled disruption through the SaaS model and changed the market dynamic in a cohesive way. "Hyperscalers are key to building the bridge between the telco and techco model," he stated. "Our most successful customers are bringing different technologies together and building powerful vertical propositions. Even with AI in the SMB sector."

While AI and disruptive technology won't be playing a starring role in the SMB sector any time

Becoming a one-stop-shop means being broader and deeper than you are today, but the issue we hear from channel partners is how to do this

soon, knowing when and how to plan for it is critical to an MSP's sustainable growth. How MSPs pivot towards differentiation will also become more important, noted Smethurst. Although he urged resellers to embrace technology, he also encouraged them to focus on their customer base first as a foundation for creating differentiated strategies. "Understand who your customers are, what they look like and identify areas where you can deliver innovation," he said. "Ideally, design something that can be replicated, whether through verticalisation or a particular solution that's applicable to many businesses. Our role as a supplier is to help with the messaging on the technology that's being delivered."

The one-stop-shop advantage

Use cases that can be repurposed to provide the same capability in many environments is key to breaking away from the status quo. MSPs will also see an unassailable upside from a differentiated proposition that Marke says will be sustainable for at least the next decade. "Become the strategic one-stop-shop partner for smaller businesses while bringing in innovation and helping SMBs to keep pace with technology," he stated. "Becoming a one-stop-shop means being broader

and deeper than you are today, but the issue we hear from channel partners is how to do this."

Sustainable differentiation for MSPs over the next ten years also involves a GTM proposition with recurring revenues, subscriptions and a price-per-user per-month model for the core stack of services – while focusing on innovating how MSPs deliver that platform, observed Marke. "The MSPs that grow fast focus on how they deliver that platform," he added. "They have teams focused on automation, which could mean lead to cash, making it easy to buy, sell and build etc. Much of this innovation isn't in the OSS, it's in the operational systems where differentiating processes can be created."

Likewise, future success will also be influenced by doing a lot more than simply ordering and provisioning, noted Murphy. "Over the coming two years we should all be doing integration and automation as standard, including the customer," he said. "The next stage is APIs into the network, enabling customers to be fully autonomous. However, while portals, AI and integration are great, if a customer can't pick up a phone and speak to someone during an escalation they'll go elsewhere."

As we have seen, charting the right path forward, and striking the right balance between the themes discussed in this Comms Vision panel debate, means prioritising the curation of not only technologies and services, but also the experiences of channel partners, believes Marke. "Our partners are the innovators and our role is to understand all the innovation points and bring them together," he stated. "As a galvanising force we can share experiences and weave a story to tell all entrepreneurs in the channel, and learn from each other. That's our value." ■

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Big impacts felt by chan

The ramifications of increased employer National Insurance Contributions introduced by Chancellor of the Exchequer Rachel Reeves are strongly felt by channel business leaders across a range of impact zones.



JALPA SHARMA
CEO
DBSL

THE National Insurance rise poses a major challenge for SMEs, especially those with UK-based full-time staff as it raises payroll costs, forcing businesses to prioritise cost management and carefully balance workforce planning to maintain affordability. Many businesses may consider more flexible staffing models, such as hiring contractors or remote workers, which can help reduce the direct tax impact. This approach will help save costs and open them up to a larger talent pool without added NI expenses. In the tech landscape, higher operational costs may drive companies to adopt efficiency focused solutions like automation, cloud services and AI to cut expenses. However, tech spending among end users, especially SMEs, could tighten as they deal with these increased payroll costs. Industries like retail and hospitality, which are already cost-sensitive, may slow their tech investments.



DAVID WARDELL
DIRECTOR
EVOKE TELECOM

A recent customer conversation around investment in AI drew this response - 'Following Rachel's Budget we are spending no money!'. NIC up, fleet costs up, fuel and energy up, inflation up, interest rates going back up – is there a danger that UK plc might redirect investment budget to offset rising business costs? Will we see a new round of redundancy and outsourcing? Unfortunately, investment is optional but some costs are not. Rachel Reeves offers her wealth of business experience and advises we all need to work smarter and seek out greater efficiencies. For us that's a sharper focus on retention, hyper attention to value proposition and ROI and more attention to payments. Increases in CGT will not dissuade everyone from looking at divestment as opposed to new investment. Dangerous times for the smaller resellers perhaps.



ADRIAN SUNDERLAND
CEO
JOLA

AT a high level, we forecast that the NI rise will increase our overheads by around two per cent in the next financial year. It's significant but not catastrophic. I really worry about the impact on our apprenticeships and young people in general. The minimum wage increases, with a lower NI threshold and higher employer NI rates, create a triple threat to the young. Our costs to employ an 18-year-old trainee will increase by 41 per cent between 2023 and 2025, whereas our costs to employ an experienced person will only increase by six per cent. I don't think the appetite of our customers to continue growing and improving their businesses will be affected. The £40 billion of taxes will be invested in the public sector, so we should expect technology spending via the public sector frameworks to be a huge opportunity during this parliament.



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Headcount following NI hike



RICHARD BETTS
CEO
VIZST TECHNOLOGY

WE are considering ways of offsetting the increased expense from the NI increase by streamlining internal costs. We have reviewed ways to reduce our licensing costs by consolidating internal licenses and using AI to automate certain processes without impacting headcount. We are focused on a revised training programme to upskill our employees in areas we initially planned to hire over the coming year. This impacts our team's growth plans and morale. We will be discussing with our customers how they can reallocate their IT budgets, without losing them. Many sectors should see sustained or increased tech spend from government incentives and funding allocations, such as utilities and sciences. The government has committed to one of the highest levels of investment in the technology space to bolster growth, as well as additional R&D funding.



GREG HAWTHORN
MD - MSP
ESPRIA

THE NI increase will significantly raise operational costs, particularly in labour-intensive areas. Overall sustainable growth will also be slowed as the ability to spend and invest in initiatives becomes more limited. Acceleration of automation is therefore required to drive down overheads, thereby powering workforce optimisation and allowing for further business flexibility. The rise will directly impact customer support and operational departments, so accelerating investment in process automation may counter these challenges and reduce manual workflow dependency. Businesses may invest in an outsourcing model to limit 'bench costs', exerting financial pressure on smaller tech firms with restrictive margins. Larger firms, while better financed to absorb the costs, could end up transferring these to customers to retain margins. Equally, this could be seen in smaller firms which could cause customers to spend less.



IAN DUNSTAN
MD
COBALT

EVEN though Rachel Reeves promised to keep £20 billion for research and development, it's not enough to help small businesses, especially in tech sectors. The focus seems to be more on keeping the economy stable and dealing with immediate financial issues, which means there's not much left for new and exciting projects. This lack of support is a significant roadblock to innovation, making it challenging for small businesses to grow and try new ideas. While the budget aims to bring stability, it's killing innovation and stifling growth. Reeves kept her promise and didn't hit the working person, she just hit their employer and the chances of any pay rise. We are an industry of survivors and will still flourish, but this feels like a kick in the teeth.



JAY BALL
CEO
FLOTEK

WE continue to recruit to fuel growth, but for low or no growth businesses the tax rises could put a dent in any recruitment plans. With our focus on IT services, our cost of delivery is highly correlated to changes in staff costs, and unfortunately this means customers ultimately sharing the burden. Ambitious businesses will embrace the higher return from investing in the right technology. The threat of increased CGT has been ever-present. There will always be owners looking to exit for the right price, but I don't expect buyers to bridge the valuation impact of higher employment costs and higher taxes. Funding for businesses to up-skill their teams in using AI and RPA would boost productivity and stop SMEs getting left behind. The Government is not making the link between helping SMEs to succeed and positive economic growth. Giving SMEs the confidence to invest will have a significant knock-on effect and increase future tax income.



PAUL BILLINGHAM
DIRECTOR AND CO-FOUNDER
KNIGHT CORPORATE FINANCE

BUSINESSES will look to improve efficiencies to offset the higher costs of employing people, and we may see a rise in technology spending like during the pandemic. The CGT changes were not as bad as feared and we have not seen any post-budget change to M&A activity. I think everyone recognises that it could have been much worse. However, business owners will now be paying more CGT on business sales – a capital gain of £3 million prior to the budget would have resulted in a CGT charge of circa £500k, and this has immediately increased to £580k, rising to £620k from April 25 and £660k from April 26. Anyone considering selling their business over the next couple of years will probably start the process sooner.



MARK CURTIS-WOOD
NON-EXECUTIVE CHAIRMAN
BLUE ORANGE

OUR own NI contributions are expected to rise by over 36%, placing additional pressure on our operating costs. To mitigate this, our strategic planning is already focused on streamlining operations and enhancing productivity, to support our team while safeguarding profitability. The increased cost of employment will have the greatest impact, particularly on recruitment decisions. To address this, we plan to prioritise growth through acquisitions and place a stronger focus on high-margin service offerings. Higher costs are likely to constrain smaller firms, slowing innovation and competition. However, by educating SMEs on how efficiency-driven technologies can enhance productivity, we can help turn this cost increase into a strategic advantage. Targeted incentives for digital transformation and cybersecurity investments in SMEs would have been particularly impactful.

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Curtis-Wood move



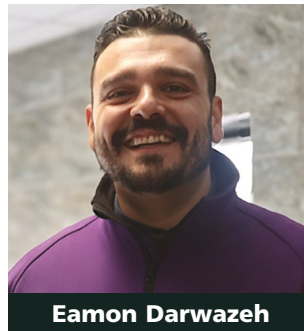
Mark Curtis-Wood

BLUE Orange Group's mission to build a £10 million business has taken a leap forward following the appointment of channel veteran Mark Curtis-Wood as Non-Executive Chairman. Curtis-Wood also becomes a minority shareholder and previously worked with Blue Orange's leadership team on growth strategy and the implementation of the Fit2Scale Growth System. He will also double down on acquisitions and new partnerships. Curtis-Wood stated: "My focus is on supporting the team in achieving their vision, identifying potential acquisition targets and expanding our market presence." Managing Director David Silous-Holt added: "Mark has already brought significant value to Blue Orange and this next phase signals a new chapter in our partnership as we work

towards achieving ambitious growth targets." Lancs-based Blue Orange began its commercial life in 2007 and operates today as an IT VAR and MSP specialising in remote and on-site IT services, plus hardware supplies, to businesses, schools and colleges.

Also on the move...

FLOTEK Group has bolstered its growth plan with the appointment of Eamon Darwazeh as Head of New Business tasked with taking the firm to £20 million revenue by the end of 2025. His strategy includes the formation of a new outbound appointment setting team and the deployment of more field-based business development managers. Darwazeh was formerly Head of Sales at Onestream and Sales Director at Solution IP. Flotek Group CEO Jay Ball stated: "We've grown the business through acquisition and driving growth within our base, and now see opportunities across the UK to further drive new customer expansion."



Eamon Darwazeh

ELITE Group's Interim Managing Director Peter Jury has assumed the role permanently. He took the interim role in April this year and steered the firm through a period of change following a restructure and demerger. CEO Adam Turton stated: "Peter's proven leadership and dedication to our goals make him the ideal candidate to lead Elite Group into the future."

RACHEL Tindle has been instate as Managing Director of cloud services firm Pinnacle (recently acquired by K3 Capital). She brings over 30 years experience in the Sage and ERP sector. "We'll focus on driving impactful results for SMEs, fostering innovation and upholding the culture that has always been at the heart of Pinnacle," stated Tindle. Chairman Ken Montgomery commented: "Rachel's appointment is a step forward for Pinnacle. Her leadership approach is direct, approachable and deeply aligned with our values."

AGILITAS IT Solutions' COO Sara Wilkes has stepped into the CEO role. She has circa 18 years tech channel experience and



Sara Wilkes

prior to joining Agilitas worked at Computacenter and most recently SCC as Director of Customer Experience. Wilkes held the position of Agilitas' COO since the beginning of the year and is especially keen to accelerate the D&I agenda. "I am deeply passionate about creating an environment where diversity of thought, background

and experience is celebrated," stated Wilkes. "I believe that an inclusive culture leads to greater creativity, innovation and collaboration which ultimately drives success."

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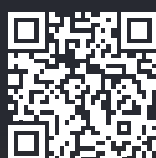
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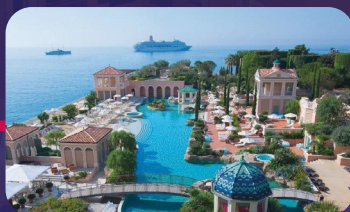
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