



A growth plan to inspire all ambitious channel players P32

Janni Thornton's flair for entrepreneurial talent pays off P44



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Benchmark report sets partner grade

UNION Street Technologies is claiming an industry first with the launch of a free service that enables partners to measure their effectiveness against rivals.

EXCLUSIVE

The new Benchmarking service evaluates the baseline and comparative data gathered by Union Street's aBILLity billing platform and produces analytical reports that enable reseller partners to compare their activities against industry averages.

The opt-in service allows participating partners to identify gaps between current and desired performances in key areas. Benchmarking will initially offer eight reports.

Union Street MD Tony Cook (pictured left with Head of Sales and Marketing Vincent Disneur) said: "By harvesting anonymised data from our billing platform, Benchmarking provides reseller partners with valuable business insights. These include reports on revenue growth, profit margin and charge rates, as well as analytics on how revenues are split between services, calls and by carrier.

"As Benchmarking gains traction it will help partners to spot early trends in sales of cer-

tain services and enable them to focus their sales and marketing activities on those areas."

Benchmarking represents an investment of almost 2,000 man hours and £100k, and with 450-plus reseller partners using the aBILLity platform Cook says his customer base represents a good knowledge base for statistical reliability.

"The reports will provide a strong industry benchmark average and a valuable indication of business performance for resellers," he said. See page 26

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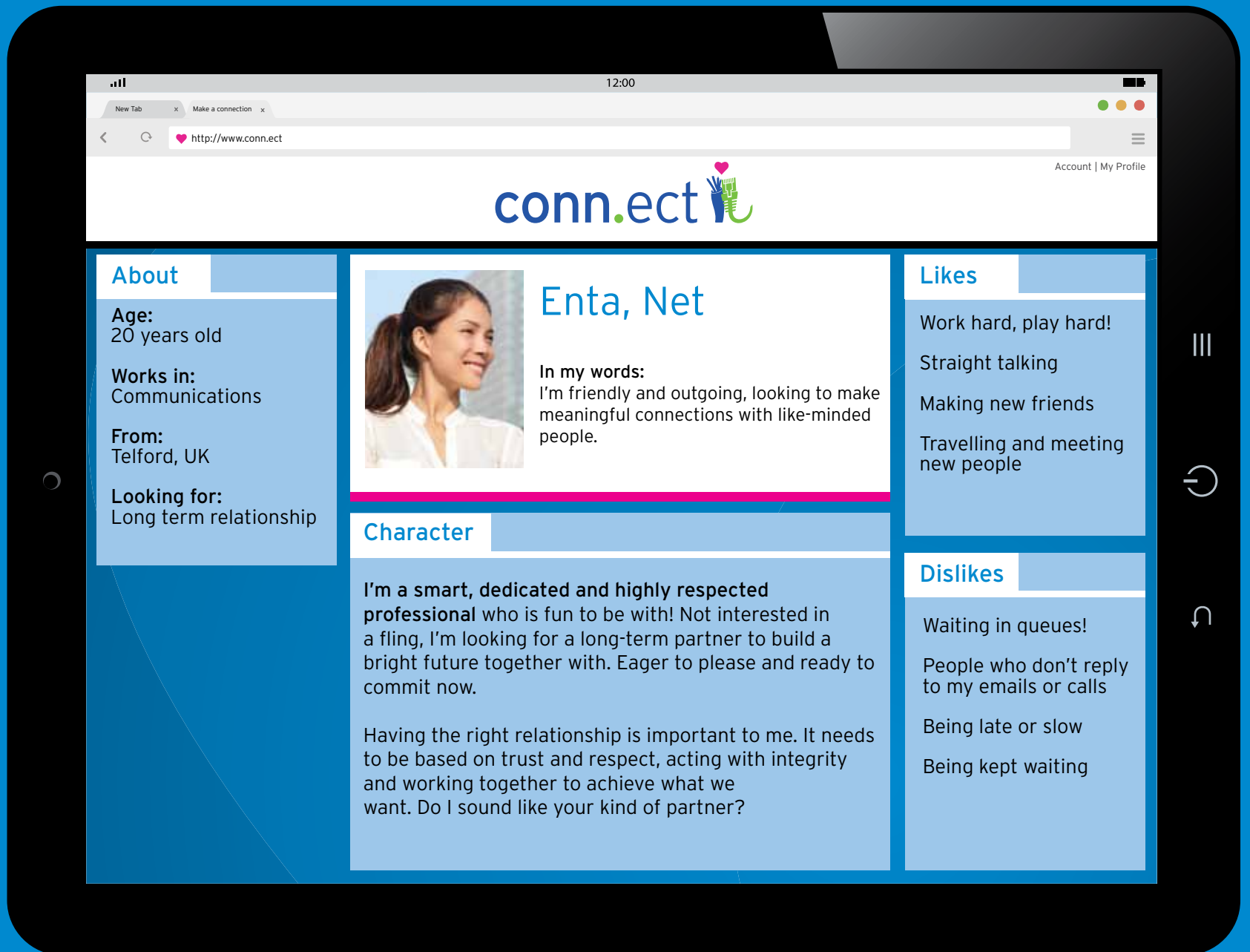


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EDITOR'S COMMENT



Stuart Gilroy

THIS month's issue of Comms Dealer marks, albeit understatedly, our 20th anniversary. It is not our habit to light a match to the celebratory fireworks and put ourselves centre stage. We prefer to remain 100 per cent focused on the industry and the people who make it tick, to celebrate

their visions, ambitions and achievements. So without further ado, welcome to April's Comms Dealer magazine.

Last month, Ofcom got tough with BT. This time the watchdog did not default to previous inactions. Instead, it sharpened its teeth to bite. In response, BT declared 'no surprises here' and labelled Ofcom's proposals a 'cherry picker's charter'. See page 36 for the full story on Ofcom's plans which form part of its Business Connectivity Market Review.

With the ground thus prepared for a BT-Ofcom clash, let's turn our attention to non-regulatory matters. In these pages entrepreneurial flair and talent is on display, inspiring more of the same from aspirational players. See page 44 for the story on Pebbletree's remarkable growth journey, and page 32 where plan.com's ambition to become a one billion pound business is revealed.

Those who thrive know it demands a special quality, which is an entrepreneurial spirit. The same flame that sparked Comms Dealer into existence 20 years ago when Editorial Director Nigel Sergent established the magazine. I've worked on the publication for 16 of those 20 years and have never, for a tiny second, looked at the clock. Such is the variety, pace and interest that our industry commands, which will most certainly continue to be the case as Comms Dealer enters its third decade of serving the channel.

We will be holding a special 20th anniversary celebration party after the Comms Dealer Sales Awards on May 5th (see page 48), so book your table and raise a glass to celebrate two decades of channel development with us.

Stuart Gilroy, Editor

KCOM restructures under single brand

IT AND comms services provider KCOM Group is to bring its business activities under a single brand effective 4th April, when Smart421, Kcom, Eclipse and other KC brands will be represented by a new-look KCOM badge.

The move creates a more integrated business and is part of a transition phase that included the sale of KCOM Group's national network infrastructure for £90m in December.

Chief Executive Bill Halbert said: "Bringing together our capability and expertise under a single brand will give all of our customers visibility of, and access to, our full range of services and enable us to respond to their needs in a more agile and flexible way.

"For our Hull and East Yorkshire customers, our transformation gives us the capacity to accelerate our deployment of ultrafast fibre broadband and create a future-proof platform that has the capacity to satisfy the demands of homes and business as they evolve."

Ultrafast broadband will be available to three quarters of KC's customers by December 2017, stated the company, which has committed addition-



Bill Halbert



Gary Young

al investment to accelerate its deployment of ultrafast fibre broadband across its Hull and East Yorkshire network.

As a result of the increased funding around 91,000 more homes and businesses will have access to KC's Lightstream service over the next 20 months, meaning that it will be available to 148,000 local properties by December 2017. This brings the total capital investment in KC's fibre deployment to approximately £60m.

KC's MD Gary Young said: "We're focused on improving services for our customers which is why we're investing many millions of pounds to make Hull the UK's ultrafast broadband capital.

"This will help local people make the most of the benefits of

being online and help businesses to start up and grow, creating jobs and long-term prosperity.

"We're a successful national business but our roots are firmly in this area and our commitment to Hull and East Yorkshire remains as strong as ever.

"Moving to a national brand means we can raise the profile of the region at the same time as promoting our business."

Lord Haskins, Chair of the Humberside Local Enterprise Partnership, commented: "The Humber has a significant digital economy with businesses of all types and sizes relying on digital technology to operate and, in many cases, innovate, so a robust infrastructure is vital to our economic success."

To find out what the rebrand means to Eclipse, see page 35

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COMMENT: THE GREAT EU DEBATE



Richard Carter

WITH the great EU referendum looming large how are you planning to vote? Many observers are claiming this is the most important decision in a lifetime and I wouldn't disagree. As well as the personal ramifications, equally important is the impact it will have on UK PLC and the comms industry in general. It's sometimes hard to assess the true extent of remaining in or out,

with an element of scare mongering and bending of the truth perhaps inevitable from both sides.

In recent years the comms industry has become very much pan-European but at Nimans we're proud to be a privately owned British concern. For me there are some strong arguments for remaining as part of the EU but there are equally compelling reasons to leave.

Millions of jobs are linked to our EU membership and some of Britain's biggest trading partners are EU members. It's easier than ever for us to work and travel across Europe, and being part of a collective group gives us greater influence on the global stage. The majority of CBI members believe it would be in the best interests of their business and the wider UK economy to remain inside the EU.

However, opponents point to the cost of EU membership which is apparently anything from £24 million up to £55 million per day. It's claimed border controls would be enhanced by leaving and other countries successfully 'go it alone' such as Norway. There's also a view that the EU lacks democracy and enforces some quite silly rules. Thanks to Brussels it's now 'illegal' to serve burgers that are still pink. I know this from personal experience. It's crazy! Whatever the final outcome, a Britain that continues to thrive and prosper certainly gets my vote.

Richard Carter, Group Sales and Business Development Director, Nimans

Virgin eyes smaller firms via partners

VIRGIN Media Business has swung its gaze onto the small business sector and entered the indirect partner channel having joined forces with distributors DMSL and Daisy Distribution.

They aim to recruit 500-plus resellers this year to resell Virgin Media Business's small business products including broadband bundles with speeds up to 300Mbps.

The indirect partner channel will operate in parallel with the existing desk-based sales team run out of Virgin Media Business's Manchester office.

Partners gain access to training, sales and marketing toolkits and will be supported by a dedicated indirect partner team within Virgin Media Business.

Mike Smith, Director of Small Business at Virgin Media Business, said: "Our new indirect partner sales channel will allow us to sell more services to the small business community which is crying out for a faster Internet connection."

John Carter, MD of DMSL, said: "We have already started recruiting resellers for Virgin Media's ultrafast business broadband and the response so far has been encouraging. Virgin Media Business is mak-



Mike Smith

ing a long-term commitment to driving its channel business."

Daisy Distribution's MD Dave McGinn stated: "The addition of this product set into our portfolio complements our strategy of offering partners a

complete range to market out to their customers.

"We believe that this is a real opportunity to deliver value back to Virgin Media and to the wider mobile and telecoms partner channels."

Virgin Media Business's 'Digital Opportunity' report, published in October last year, stated that digital technologies could provide a £56bn boost to SMEs, as well as create over 920,000 new UK jobs over the next two years.

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PBX Hosting in Swyx deal

SWYX'S cloud-based UC solution is now available from PBX Hosting's data centre in Telehouse, London Docklands, following an agreement between the two companies.

Swyx International Cloud Manager Michael Hostbaek commented on the deal: "By using PBX Hosting, our partners gain access to a ready-made facility that offers the supporting infrastructure and services they need to meet the demands from a growing number of SMEs looking for hosted communications."

PBX Hosting co-founder and Sales Director Stuart Gibson added: "We anticipate huge interest from SMEs as demand



Michael Hostbaek

for subscription-based communications increases."

PBX Hosting also offers services such as SIP trunking, call termination and origination and number porting, and an online portal for channel partners to manage provisioning and billing for customers.



NEW Star Networks (NSN) Channel Director Ryan Kersey cracked open the bubbly to celebrate NSN's most profitable bill run since the business launched in December 2010, reporting record breaking revenue and margins from the channel operation. "The February bill run confirms the success of NSN's cloud telephony strategy and that our joined up channel marketing programme, Affinity, is delivering the goods," he enthused. Pictured above with Kersey are Ewelina Oszust (left), Office and Business Process Manager, and Katy Brown, Corporate Account Manager.

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TWL secures Advance link



Andrew Nicholson and Andy Davies

TWL Voice and Data is gunning to become the biggest UC provider in Wales following a link-up with Advance Communications that strengthens TWL's presence in the mobile space.

The Cardiff-based telecoms firm, which expects turnover of £2.4m for 2016, will offer mobile solutions to its customer base and service the fixed line and broadband requirements of Advance's customers.

TWL MD Andrew Nicholson said: "The move is another step along our growth plan. Advance Communications will now act

as our mobile division handling all queries regarding billing, technical support, tariff changes and new business."

Advance Communications Director Andy Davies said: "We have grown consistently over the last nine years but the sharpest increase in business has been from the introductions we've made through our partnership with TWL Voice and Data.

"Currently, we manage over 2,000 connections between Vodafone, EE and O2. We expect this to significantly increase through our partnership with TWL Voice and Data."

Callstream snared by J2 Global

US-BASED technology company J2 Global has acquired Callstream for an undisclosed sum in a deal that saw the exit of Callstream's former backers Octopus Investments and YFM Equity Partners.

Mick Crosthwaite, CEO of Callstream, said: "Callstream has expanded significantly following backing from YFM and Octopus Investments. They have been terrific partners and played an instrumental role in helping us achieve our success."

Grant Paul Florence, Head of the Intermediate Capital team at Octopus, added: "Callstream has developed a loyal customer base over the years and enters a new chapter of growth as part of a global enterprise."

YFM and Octopus were advised by Knight Corporate Finance. Paul Billingham, Knight Director, commented: "We have worked with Callstream since we founded Knight over seven years ago and this latest transaction is a culmination of advising on strategy, M&A and exit planning to ensure the best outcome for shareholders."

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SHORT CALL

Northamber's pretax loss widened in the first half (to December 31st), £547k higher than the £292k loss a year earlier. Revenue fell to £32.5m from £35.7m, hit by slow commercial sector sales and disruption from the release of Microsoft Windows 10 software, said the firm. It said market uncertainty made it difficult to forecast any near-term return to profit, but it is confident about the medium and long-term outlook.



CHESS Partner Services bagged an awards double at the O2 Partner Service Awards, collecting the Digital Excellence and Customer Excellence Awards. MD of Chess Partner Services, John Pett, said: "It was a great honour to be the only distributor that received both the Digital and Customer Excellence Awards this year. It is thanks to the effort of everyone at Chess and all of our partners over the last 12 months. There is an increasing customer demand for digital and new world products and it is therefore imperative that we all evolve to facilitate this demand. I am passionate about empowering our partners to help both their businesses and the service that they deliver grow." Pictured above (l-r): Darren Buttrick, Sales Director SMB, O2; John Pett; and Jason Phillips, Head of Partners, O2.

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COMMENT: MARKETING MATTERS



Elvire Gosnold

THE continued popularity of multichannel marketing means that strong and consistent brand identity is more important than ever. Multichannel marketing is the communication with customers and prospects using a combination of indirect and direct communication channels such as websites, direct mail, email, mobile etc. A multichannel approach is a fantastic way to engage with your target audience.

However, ensuring the key messages and corporate 'look and feel' are the same across all marketing channels is harder to execute if not planned correctly.

Consistency can be easily lost when several companies and agencies are working on the same brand. For example, there may be an in-house marketer for collateral, an e-marketing agency for e-shots and web designers for web updates. When so many different parties are working together, brand subtleties can get inadvertently missed.

Detailed brand guidelines are an obvious starting point to ensure there are clear rules for all parties to adhere to. Viewing your marketing activity as an integrated campaign rather than individual marketing projects is another way of flagging any inconsistencies at an early stage.

Sending out differing messages to your target market will lead to confusion. But ensuring there is straightforward consistency across all your marketing is simpler than you think. Easy checks such as making sure your business card has the same font and colours as your product proposal document makes a difference to how prospects and customers view your company. Branded product sheets explaining your services in an easy to understand manner is also advisable, and don't forget to clearly state why your company is better than your competitor.

Elvire Gosnold, Director, Blabbermouth Marketing

Gamma's on tip-top form

STRONG SIP and cloud PBX sales continue to drive up Gamma's profits. In its audited results for the year ended 31st December 2015 the company reported a 10.7% rise in revenue to £191.8m, and a 21.7% jump in gross profit to £82.3m.

The number of installed SIP trunks increased from 234,000 to 360,000 (up 54%), while cloud PBX users rose from 80,000 to 142,000 (up 78%).

Gross profit from indirect business increased from £52.4m to £64.1m (up 22.3%), with channel partner numbers growing from 725 to 834 (up 15%); while strong growth in the direct business produced gross profit of £18.2m (up 19.7%).

Bob Falconer, CEO, said: "Our current strategic products of SIP and cloud PBX have continued to drive growth.

"A growing reputation in the enterprise and public sector markets has helped us win sizeable orders such as HMRC via a channel partner, and Taylor Wimpey and Peabody Housing through our direct sales teams. Progress has also been made with our pipeline of products.

"Our multi-site data network was launched on time at the end of June 2015, our new mobile service is due for full launch in June 2016, while at the same time significant value adding enhancements have been made to our strategic products.

"Gamma has also invested in reducing the cost of its access network. By extending our own network capability deeper into local areas, the first reduced cost access sites in London are coming on line in May 2016."

More Gamma news on p13

SHORT CALLS

The addition of 70,000-plus seats this year has propelled Mitel past the two million cloud business comms subscriber milestone, reflected in the vendor's 44% cloud revenue growth in Q4. "Demand for cloud communications continues as businesses of all sizes look for flexible solutions and commercial options," said Jon Brinton, Executive VP and GM, Mitel Cloud.

IP Integration has been awarded UK Partner of the Year 2016 by Avaya. The firm has a number of Avaya 'firsts' to its name: The first Avaya CPOD deployment by the channel, the first BT Wholesale Avaya Cloud CC solution in the banking sector and internationally, where IP Integration delivered the first large scale omnichannel web-based chat solution on the Avaya platform.

PBX sales buck analyst forecasts

DESPITE the assertions of market analysts who say the PBX market is in terminal decline, Nimans has reported rising PBX shipments, up 5% in Q4 2015.

"According to market statistics PBX CCU shipments have fallen off a cliff but our sales

were up," said Paul Burn, Head of Category Sales at Nimans. "We are not witnessing the declines indicated by the stats that show alarming drops.

"It is hard for PBX resellers, and hosted is increasing, but there's a balance to be struck.

"There are strong arguments for resellers to have both PBX and hosted in their kit bags, and the majority of resellers are grasping the nettle.

"Hosted will continue to grow, but in the main resellers are relaxed about the situation."

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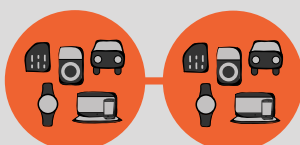
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One number, multiple devices



M2M, IoT, Mobile Broadband



One device, multiple numbers



COMMENT: MOVE WITH THE TIMES



Clifford Norton

THE comms landscape now encompasses far more than your traditional phone and broadband. The growing demand for cloud-based services, the crossover into the IT space and the emergence of IoT means that as businesses we have to be more adaptable. To match the rate at which the industry is evolving the necessity to have a dynamic portfolio is clear.

I blame google! The ability to have an answer to anything in a matter of milliseconds means that as a society we want it all, and we want it now, and why shouldn't we? Key to this is ease of doing business. We all strive to make everything as easy as possible and that behaviour has impacted on the business world. Customer behaviour requires far more immediate action than ever before. So ensuring you have the internal capabilities to meet such demand while offering a plethora of easy to buy services is a priority.

Essential to all of this is knowledge – internally knowing how to both sell and support new products, the ability to on-board them smoothly and having the required tools to take them to market. However, relying some of these key contributing factors through partners is equally imperative. Providing sufficient training, collateral and sales support is vital, especially for a channel-only business like ours.

In line with these market demands we are expanding our portfolio and introducing a number of new product areas to our core business. Like it or not, the market is evolving rapidly and the next few years will determine who sinks, who swims, and who lays blissfully in the sunshine.

Clifford Norton, Managing Director, Channel Telecom

• OFCOM has placed new demands on BT to improve its service including rules for Openreach to speed up the installation of high speed business lines and reduce wholesale costs. (p36)

TIS market's in Q4 decline

A STRONG dollar has tipped the telecom infrastructure services (TIS) market into a Q4 2015 decline, down 1.5%, across all geographies except APAC which saw continued spending on network infrastructure deployments in China and demand for a range of services in India.

That's according to TBR's latest Telecom Infrastructure Services Benchmark which noted that forward thinking vendors are getting ahead of the market shift from product-centric services to outcome-based ones, such as IoT enablement and network transformation.

"Strong spend in China and India continued to buoy the

global TIS market," said TBR Senior Analyst Chris Antlitz.

"A big issue many vendors will need to grapple with is how to continue growing revenue once operator capex spend in China goes post-peak.

"TBR expects that inflection point to occur in mid-2016.

"Once that happens, growth will become more challenging for the global TIS market to achieve because network deployment volumes are coming down on an aggregate level and will be only partly offset by growth in professional services for transformation."

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



TELECOMS World has achieved Gamma Platinum Partner status following a strong performance selling the Horizon IP platform and connectivity solutions. Gamma's Head of Resale Channel Roan Pratt commented: "It is exciting to work with a company that is ambitious and embraces not only our services but also our vision."

Telecoms World's MD Neil Barrall added: "Becoming a Platinum Partner brings not only a sense of achievement but also the opportunity to work more closely with Gamma."

Pictured above: Roan Pratt (left) with Neil Barrall.



CHANNEL sales veteran Jim Sewell is masterminding a new sports challenge which he hopes will become The London Marathon for school children. Sewell, former Sales Director at Alternative Networks, has launched the first schools triathlon event which will take place on April 17th at the Royal Russell School in Croydon. It's all in aid of the London-based charity Restless Development where Sewell now works as a trustee. "There is nothing better than combining competitive and fun sport with fundraising for young people around the world who need our support," he said. "The children are excited about taking part in a triathlon, many for the first time, but they are also proud about raising money to help others. We see the RestlessTriathlon becoming the kids' equivalent of the London Marathon." To find out more email: jim@restlessdevelopment.org

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COMMENT: STRATEGIC TALK



Alex Tempest

LAST month, Ofcom published its long-awaited, once in a decade strategic review of the telecommunications sector. The review looked at all aspects of the UK telco market, from the structure of Openreach to consumer switching. Overall, Ofcom concluded that Openreach should be governed at arm's length from BT Group, with greater independence in taking

its own decisions on budget, investment and strategy. Furthermore, the review also emphasised the need for Openreach to serve all wholesale customers equally and consult them on its investment plans, suggesting this could be achieved by giving customers (such as Sky and TalkTalk) seats on the board.

More encouragingly, in the report Ofcom also expressed a specific commitment to delivering nationwide fibre to the premise (FTTP) for the first time. Key to this will be ensuring that BT really does open up access to its poles and underground cable ducts. As we know from our experience of building our trial FTTP network in York, it is currently easier, cheaper and more efficient to build a new telegraph pole next to an existing BT one than to share it.

The Business Connectivity Market Review, announced in late March, is going further and championing the increased regulation of Openreach. We are welcoming the access to dark fibre and the reduction in lease line rates as they will truly benefit our customers.

Ultimately, Ofcom's conclusions are just the first step on a long road to ensuring that providers, partners and their customers are put first. With this in mind, we firmly believe there is a key role for the partner community as they look to understand, guide and educate their customers on how Ofcom's decision now, and going forward, will impact their businesses.

Alex Tempest, Director of Partners, TalkTalk Business

Frisby eyes channel with cloud venture

COBWEB Solutions has signalled its intent to ramp up channel activities with the launch of Vuzion, a value add cloud aggregator focused on resellers, service providers and ISVs.

Cobweb boasts 20 years experience as a cloud services provider with a focus on Microsoft's CSP programme and according to newly appointed MD Michael Frisby the company will leverage its experience for the benefit of partners.

"Cloud services are driving a significant disruption across the IT channel," he said. "Vuzion partners will be supported with knowledge on how to build a sustainable cloud business, successfully manage the customer



Michael Frisby

lifecycle and speed up go-to-market time and growth rates.

"We are focused on building long-term sustainable relationships, providing integrated solutions instead of individual services. Partners can focus on building their own value add on top of cloud services while

being confident their business model is future proof."

Clare Barclay, Microsoft UK's General Manager for Small and Mid-market Solutions and Partners, added: "Cobweb is bringing value to Microsoft and the wider VAR and service provider community."



CHANNEL Telecom's top 15 partners were treated to a five star luxury 'thank you' skiing trip to Les Trois Vallees in the Alps. The three night, four day stay in the heart of Meribel is the company's third such trip and included a programme of skiing, snowboarding, an outdoor heated pool, slope-side sauna, along with mild carousing at La Follie Douce, a mountain top bar. Channel Telecom MD Clifford Norton said: "We wanted to treat our most successful partners for their hard work. Each year this trip gets bigger and better. This year the party grew to 15, next year we may be taking 20."

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Bob debates supply chain



Bob Falconer

GAMMA CEO Bob Falconer believes resellers should rationalise their supply chains to compete successfully in the changing ICT market.

In his keynote speech at the fourth 'Gamma does Downton' 2016 partner roadshow in London, Falconer told an audience of 300-plus partners that having just two or three suppliers gives reseller organisations the capability to cover the full spectrum of customer needs.

"Today it is vital to be selling a full portfolio of comms and, preferably, IT," he said.

"Competitors doing it all will always discount competitors. You could buy from more suppliers or even buy a company with different expertise to increase your portfolio. But that strategy is veneer thin. You could start building your own infrastructure but it takes time and can end up sub-scale, unreliable and unintegrated.

"You could wrap your business around a single big supplier but their contracts can be restrictive and controlling; and where does it leave you if their channel strategy changes which it can do on a whim?

"It is far better to work sensibly with two or three suppliers as it adds diversity to your business and means you can spend more time talking to customers and not trying to integrate a multiplicity of products."

This was all in line with Gamma's new product and service announcements which Falconer believes keeps them 'ahead of the game' with the help of its channel partners.

"Innovating is important to us, but it is all about developing rapidly and getting disruptive products and services to the marketplace. We know the big boys are slower and will eventually commoditise so getting ahead is important. The channel is into every nook and cranny of UK business so you are the final part of our strategy."

Among the 'disruptive' products unveiled at the conference were a bolt-on Multi-Net mobile solution that enables customers to seamlessly 'hop' from one carrier to another when a signal is weak; a business grade mobile voicemail solution; upgraded Ethernet and Inbound offerings and a new SIP trunk call manager solution that gives end users the ability to manage their own number via an app.

Product Manager Alan Mackie stressed that Gamma's MVNO offerings enable resellers to compete and beat the big four with no loss of customer ownership. "You own the contract, you own the deals," he told delegates.

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COMMENT: A BRAND NEW MONTH



Pete Tomlinson

THIS is the first column you'll be reading from me following the launch of our new KCOM brand. As you'll have hopefully seen, on the 4th April all our businesses – that's KC, Eclipse, Kcom and Smart421 – became united under one name. How you feel about that probably depends on your own perspective and perhaps also your personal experience of

working with us. For me I see this as a massive opportunity. With the convergence of software and communications, it makes sense for us to become more straightforward and make all of our capability easily accessible to all of our partners. However, we know a brand is about more than a logo – it's how you feel about us, it's how we work together, it's the good times we've shared and it's the tough times we've helped each other through.

For me, what's important about the newly formed KCOM is remembering our shared successes and looking forward to those yet to come. The first WAN we helped you win, celebrating your 1,000th inbound customer, the customer service award you collected, your largest hosting win, your record sales year, your first Bentley. Our technology, our products, our pricing, our service are all important and we know that to continue to be successful together we have to keep investing in all of those areas.

However, the heart of any great business is the people. For me, Henry, Sarah, Helena and all the rest of the team across our business we'd love to hear what you think.

Pete Tomlinson, Director, KCOM

- ANALYST projections on the boundless revenue potential for M2M continue to spill forth, but the channel's ability to deliver on the promise has been conspicuously limited – until now. (p30)
- THE channel's role in contact centres is not just to indulge end users in all their technology preferences, but to greatly enhance these requirements with insightful analytics and integration. (p50)

Abzorb boosted by new data network

BRIGHOUSE-based UC provider Abzorb has acquired a data network and kicked off its new project with a free activation and migration offer on ADSL2+ and FTTC which ran up until 31st March 2016.

The move signals how far the company has travelled from its mobile roots and this expansion is reflected in the scale of its reseller base which now numbers circa 360.

"Abzorb is investing heavily for the future, giving partners and customers access to the latest connectivity products and technology in a single secure and scalable network environment," commented Mark Riddell, Head of Indirect Channel.

"We are planning for more strategic growth through managed reseller recruitment and deeper product penetration into the reseller base."

Riddell also noted that just 36 months ago Abzorb offered one product, now the company leverages a full white labelled portfolio of products and services such as SIP, hosted, PBX, mobile, WAN and LAN.

To support ongoing channel growth Abzorb is onboarding additional Business Development Managers.



Mark Riddell

The new data network offers bandwidth options up to 10Gbps, hyperfast Gigabit services in many areas of the UK, and features network monitoring tools that enable resellers to manage their customers' products through the Abzorb Portal.

"A quote tool incorporating multiple carriers means partners can edit and re-quote in seconds, while automated order processing with electronic signatures speeds up the order process," commented Riddell.

"Abzorb partners can also implement alerting and reports

to help them manage their customers' connectivity."

Alongside the launch of its data network Abzorb has rolled out a managed CPE service plus free monitoring tools for CPE connected to its network, such as Zyxel and Draytek routers.

"Abzorb aims to provide a one-stop solution and ongoing support," added Riddell. "We've been doing that since 2007, and we look forward to doing it for many years to come."

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Wyless purchase creates global M2M powerhouse



Alex Brisbourne

KORE Wireless Group has snapped up Wyless Group Holdings in an all-cash transaction creating a combined company with 350 staff, a customer base of more than 3,000 B2B companies globally, serving six million-plus subscribers.

The organisation has become one of the six largest providers of M2M/IoT services globally, inclusive of carriers. The combined business has a presence and data centre operations in Asia, Latin America, Europe and North America.

Both companies are long-term players in the M2M market and KORE CEO Alex Brisbourne is thrilled by the prospect of developing a globally connected business environment following the acquisition.

“That’s where the real excitement lies,” he enthused. “We are creating a global, technology-rich provider of services for the fastest growing and most interesting segment of the technology landscape, where data management and telecommunications converge.”

Brisbourne is now CEO of the combined business and Mike Coffey, current CEO of Wyless, becomes COO.

KORE’s acquisition of Wyless has been in the making for some time, observed Robin Duke-Woolley, CEO at Beecham Research, but the deal is nonetheless ‘hugely significant’, he believes.

“The combined business will have considerably more direct M2M connections than most MNO M2M business units worldwide, and will be the largest independent M2M network provider globally, certainly in terms of revenue,” commented Duke-Woolley.

He noted that both companies started out in 2003 as resellers of cellular airtime in what was then a nascent M2M market. “They have made significant acquisitions along the way,” he added.

“Wyless acquired Aspider M2M in the Netherlands and KORE purchased RACO Wireless in November 2014, primarily a US focused deal.

“Wyless adds both a European and a Latin American dimension. The overall company is now much more international in its scope.”

The acquisition is significant because few MNOs are generating M2M revenue at this level, and the deal reaffirms the role of independent resellers in the M2M market.

“They have a great future at the national and international level, something that many predicted would not happen when the MNOs started to focus harder on the M2M market seven years ago,” he stated.

“Beecham Research’s own data shows that these resellers have been growing at a faster rate than the MNOs over the last few years in terms of connection numbers and revenue.”

SHORT CALLS

Capgemini has secured a one year contract extension to provide the MOD with a secure managed service that delivers the Purchase to Pay (P2P) capability it runs for its trading partners. The £9.17m renewed contract builds on a relationship established in 2000.

Content Guru is to extend its agent desktop application storm DTA with WebRTC capabilities that incorporate person-to-person video, collaboration, screen sharing and voice calls made directly to the user’s browser. “We’ve been trialling WebRTC for over a year. The technology will be a game-changer,” stated CEO Sean Taylor.



GLASGOW-based Exsel Group has scored a deal with Celtic FC’s women’s first team as new shirt sponsor. Exsel Group MD Tom McDonald commented: “As a fast-growing Glasgow company we recognise the common brand values shared by both Exsel Group and Celtic Football Club.” Celtic’s Women’s Team Manager, David Haley, added: “We have big plans and Exsel will play an active role in the development of our team.”

SHORT CALL

Solar has been ranked in the LSE’s 1,000 companies to Inspire Britain list for the second time. The Manchester and Chippenham-based firm has grown annual turnover from £2m to £13m in seven years and is now entering a growth acceleration phase following the appointment of John Whitty as CEO. He said: “The listing is proof that we’re achieving our goals and are on the right track.”

SDN’s underrated Zen’s top results

INDUSTRY expectations for the swift uptake of Software Defined Network (SDN) are likely to be dashed unless a programme of end user education is established, suggests a new report.

Research by Exponential-e has revealed that 86% of businesses do not understand SDN while 9% do not know what benefits the technology could bring to their organisation.

“An agile and responsive network is central to driving competitive advantage,” stated

Chris Christou, Director of Engineering at Exponential-e.

SDN effectively allows organisations to reconfigure network services on-demand, meaning that enterprises can adapt the services that network providers deliver through a self-service interface.

“SDN increases efficiency and supports the flexibility demanded by fast moving organisations that are tasked with responding to unexpected outages and breaks in service,” added Christou.

ZEN Internet’s 20th year in business has been spotlighted by its best set of financial results to date (year ending September 2015), reporting a 7.1% jump in revenues from £50.6m to £54.2m and a rise in pre-tax profits to £3.2m.

These results follow a company restructure in 2014 when Zen created three customer facing divisions – Small Business and Residential, Corporate and Mid-Market and Partnerships.

Finance Director Matt Kay said: “Zen continues to benefit

from a customer-centric business model together with heavy investment in the network and an expanding product range.

“Zen has a long-term strategy of re-investing profits into the business for future growth.”

In other news Zen was named one of the best companies to work for in the UK when it was ranked 56th in The Sunday Times 100 Best Companies awards.

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UC revenues in global dip

LONGER business cycles and the move to cloud alternatives have caused the global enterprise telephony and UC market to dip 1% in Q4 2015, and drop 5% for the full-year to \$7.4bn.

According to IHS Technology's latest figures north America notched up 6% growth for the year, while the rest of the world recorded an 11% fall.

Pure IP PBXs were the only segment to post year-over-year growth (6%), but it remains almost half the size of the hybrid segment. "Though UC demand has been strong over the past two years revenue came to a halt in 2015, falling 2%," commented Diane Myers, Senior Research Director.

"The decline is attributable to pricing drops as more and more UC functionality is incorporated into PBX packages, the move of UC applications to the cloud and the general competitive environment."

IHS Technology's research also found that PBX line shipments were slightly down in 2015; and hybrid IP PBXs (which appeal to businesses that want to minimise upfront capital outlays on handsets) continue to dominate; while UC platform licenses grew 10% in 2015.



Diane Myers

"As enterprises migrate to IP and UC solutions, the top PBX vendors remain in a battle to gain customers and hold onto existing ones," added Myers.

Cisco led all vendors for the full year 2015 (35% share), followed by Avaya (17%), NEC (9%), Mitel (7%), Microsoft (6%), with 'others' accounting for 26%.

"On the UC front, Microsoft continues to have strong sales, which it looks to carry over to the voice side," said Myers.

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CityFibre's picked by Southend

CITYFIBRE has won a deal to supply a 50km future-proof dark fibre network connecting 120 public sector sites for Southend-on-Sea Borough Council.

The deal, worth £3.24m over ten years, will provide scalable, ultra-fast connectivity to underpin the council's digital strategy and make Southend CityFibre's latest Gigabit City.

The network will provide a dark fibre platform from which the council can upgrade the existing connectivity to sites including schools, colleges and council offices. Mobile masts can be connected to the network to support upgrades to 4G and 5G services, and the network can provide a backbone for Fibre to the Home deployment.

The new network will be made available on a wholesale basis to service providers. These will then be able to offer the majority of Southend's 6,000 businesses access to gigabit speed services.

Greg Mesch, Chief Executive at CityFibre, stated: "Southend has an ambitious digital strategy and the appetite to become a leading example of a smart city, while its business community is growing and hungry for connectivity options."

Duplaix hire for Exclusive

FORMER EMEA Sales Director of Arrow ECS Stephane Duplaix has joined Exclusive as Group Director for Strategic Alliances.

He brings strong experience in the cyber security and data centre distribution industries and will steer the Group's partnerships business with an increasing number of global systems integrators and key vendor partners.

Barrie Desmond, Exclusive Group COO, stated: "We're on the radar of an increasing number of global SIs and service providers and maximising this is a major priority for us."

"In parallel, our vendor global footprint expands almost weekly. This perfect storm of opportunity needs harnessing



Stephane Duplaix

and we could think of no one better than Stephane to help achieve this."

Duplaix added: "I've seen Exclusive Group challenge the old business models and offer a new service-centric vision. Achieving this on a global scale is the next and most exciting part of the journey."



SIX Degrees Group (6DG) raised over £30k for charity WeSeeHope on its second annual ski trip which forms part of its CSR programme called Six Degrees of Hope. 6DG hosted a party of 30 executives and friends in St Moritz, Switzerland, on the three day trip.

WeSeeHope supports orphans and other vulnerable children living in extreme poverty in southern and eastern Africa and works with 26 local project partners in 222 communities. Six Degrees of Hope has now raised over £330k for WeSeeHope in just four and a half years, with £100,000 raised alone in 2015.

To build on the fundraising activities so far this year two of the 6DG team will run the London Marathon in April, another will take part in the London2Brighton Challenge in May, and a 400km cycle across Malawi is on the fundraising map.

Alastair Mills, CEO of 6DG and Ambassador for WeSeeHope, stated: "This year's trip was the usual mix of great skiing and memorable apres-ski, with a fantastic group of like-minded friends and colleagues from the UK technology space. We had the added thrill of the St Moritz bobsleigh run, but even that was topped by the incredible generosity of our guests who together raised a remarkable £30k. That money will be spent wisely, helping to give new hope to young people in sub-Saharan Africa."

Tollring's alert to fraudsters

TOLLRING has added fraud detection to its iCall cloud call analytics and recording solution, enabling users to monitor inbound and outbound call trends and configure rules-based alerts that are activated by irregular call behaviour.

Fraud alerts, reports and visual dashboards can be accessed via a web browser on any mobile device, delivered via text, call, email or on a 'live tile' dashboard.

"Service providers can help their resellers and customers



Tony Martino

to minimise fraud by offering real-time monitoring and setting limits on call profiles," stated Tollring MD Tony Martino.

"Fraud detection is a rising challenge in cloud telephony and our new iCall Suite fraud module addresses this real industry issue.

"Our partners and customers can mitigate fraud and enforce company policies to reduce liability through the immediate notifications of any variances in call activity.

"This latest update in our cloud call analytics solution will positively impact the way the channel manages customers and their usage behaviour."

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Storror hails mobility era



Terry Storror

MEETING the growing demand for flexible working practices is best achieved via agile delivery models – and cloud’s modular, revenue-friendly features fit the UC bill, according to Annodata.

“After years of uncertainty as to when UC could be integrated into the workplace as a coherent service, mobile working has finally entered the mainstream as a value driven package,” stated Terry Storror, IT Services Director.

He cited figures from the Cloud Industry Forum that suggest UC will emerge as 2016’s fastest growing cloud service.

“UC once meant a hundred different things to as many people,” he said. “However, IT leaders now see the benefits and are watching the technology with interest, weighing up the value offered by improve-

ments in broadband speeds and cheaper bandwidths.

“Now, with cloud adoption common among businesses, even the smallest organisation can derive value from mobile working technologies.”

According to Storror, a coherent UC strategy should map the long-term value of the cost and accessibility of bandwidth while considering strain on the organisation’s network.

“IT leaders’ strategies must offer the path of least resistance for employees wanting to access data on the go, while ensuring the uniform use of networks and applications,” he said.

“Cloud enables businesses to monitor their usage and quickly make changes to services, so has a huge benefit over attempting to run UC on cumbersome legacy infrastructure.”

MoH key to making a Fortune

DEALER profits of circa £50k a year are achievable from the sale of Nimans’ latest music and messaging on hold solution, claims the distributor.

The reseller branded Fortune series uses web-based functionality enabling users to choose a voice actor and pick from over 300 royalty free tunes.

Message on hold, auto attendant, night greetings and IVR are all available for PBX, hosted and VoIP-based environments.

“Dealers can choose from self-script, dealer managed and now full service announcements,” stated Tom Maxwell, Nimans’ Head of Dealer Sales.

“Music and messaging on hold is proven to enhance the customer experience, reducing the amount of abandoned calls. And resellers gain ongoing revenue from the ordering of new announcements.”

Maxwell estimates average revenue to be circa £100k per year (based on standard customer bases) with margins of up to 50%.

“This is potentially a lucrative area of business for dealers to capture,” added Maxwell.

“Projects can be completed from start to finish in as little as 40 minutes.”

New players set the pace

NEW players such as CityFibre and Gigaclear will account for a 70% rise in high speed broadband connections over the next five years, according to research company IHS Technology.

“While BT is working on expanding superfast services using VDSL (FTTC) and G.Fast, alternative operators have entered the market using FTTP to increase their coverage,” said Fiona Vanier, Senior Analyst at IHS.

“Key players in the UK broadband market, such as Sky and TalkTalk, already recognise CityFibre as a viable alternative to Openreach, and a number of significant agreements have been signed with CityFibre over the last 12 to 18 months.



Fiona Vanier

“Another company pushing the boost in connections is Gigaclear which has found its niche in the market. With take-up rates as high as 40%, it is clear that this company is expanding quickly in key areas across the UK.”

Udata seals CityFibre deal

UPDATA Infrastructure, part of Capita IT Enterprise Services, has signed a national framework agreement with CityFibre enabling it to offer public and private sector services over CityFibre’s national network.

With 36 network footprints across the country and a plan to reach a total of 50 cities by 2020, CityFibre’s national reach provides comms providers such as Udata with an alternative to incumbent networks.

CityFibre’s pure fibre networks will be used as a platform



Rob Hamlin

for Udata’s public sector and enterprise customers as well as

providing the company with an option to migrate existing customers to newer technology.

CityFibre’s Commercial Director Rob Hamlin said: “As an emerging national alternative to Openreach, our networks provide Udata with a platform over which it can continue to innovate and grow.”

Bruce Strang, MD, Udata, added: “Our clients’ demands are constantly growing and it is important that we can meet them by leveraging a pure fibre network infrastructure.”



ALDERLEY Edge-based Chess took second place in the Sunday Times 100 Best Companies to Work for 2016, up one position from its 2015 ranking. Chess CEO and founder David Pollock stated: “The growth and success of our people ensures the growth and success of our business, which is why we are so passionate about making Chess such a great place to work. We’re lucky to work in a fast moving, dynamic growth industry and our people really embrace the opportunities which that provides.”

Chess staff benefit from health and pension plans, a share-option scheme, flexible working hours, plus other benefits such as massages, breakfast clubs, flu jabs, sponsorships for qualifications and happiness training conducted by Pollock. “Everyone at Chess is committed to building an energetic, hard working, fun and exciting place to work that attracts, retains and inspires people to give their best,” he added.

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NEC's merger signals strong UC emphasis

TECHNOLOGY giant NEC has merged its IT and comms divisions to form an IT and UC powerhouse offering off and on-premise cloud and hybrid solutions for partners to take to all markets.

According to UK&I Sales Director Andrew Cooper the integration will enable NEC's 300-strong reseller channel to provide converged IT and communications solutions to every type and scale of business.

This is a major transition for NEC in the UK which has been seen by industry players as solely a traditional voice vendor for many years.

Speaking at the UK launch of NEC's new Smart Enterprise group, Cooper said: "There have been major ongoing developments within NEC, obviously with the acquisition of Philips and the integration of that into the voice business.

"We then integrated the IT business which was based in France. If you look at the domestic market, we are the dominant player in the IT networking field but in the UK that is relatively unknown.

"We have now integrated our comms and IT divisions which formulated NEC Smart Enterprise Solutions and from that we formed the four pillars of the Smart Enterprise."

The pillars outlined by Cooper are Business Agility (enabling mobility and creating a more adaptive IT environment), Cloud Delivery, Collaborative Communities and Assured Services (infrastructure for business continuity).

Incorporated in the Smart Enterprise solution is a new Cloud Store cloud aggregation platform that will enable resellers to offer customers ready-to-



Andrew Cooper

use business applications from the cloud including collaboration, security and applications such as Microsoft Office 365.

Cloud Store can be fully branded by NEC's channel partners and is managed by NEC in a Tier 3 data centre with all registering, ordering and billing capabilities included.

"This development has been ongoing for a number of years and is a tried and tested solution with the likes of Telefonica and Deutsche Telecom," stated Cooper. "Now it's being brought down into the enterprise space from the carrier business.

"We are also combining our voice and Virtual Desktop Solutions to offer a Smart Workspace integrated voice and data application."

NEC claims up to 99.999% reliability on its platforms including the cloud communications suite via its Fault Tolerant servers and Express Cluster Software. "Reliability sits across the entire portfolio and from an Express Cluster point of view its vendor agnostic, so we can run that across Dell, HP or anyone else's platform," added Cooper.

"We are confident both current and potential reseller partners will now look on NEC as a secure one-stop-shop for integrated IT and comms."

SHORT CALLS

Glasgow-based Exsel Group has enabled City Cabs in Edinburgh to become Scotland's first taxi company to offer free Wi-Fi across its network. All 440 fleet vehicles will be fitted with Wi-Fi systems running on the O2 network.

Maintel has become one of Avaya's most accredited UK partners having collected the Technical Excellence Award 2016 at the vendor's UK Partner Connection Day event. This accomplishment follows Maintel's five previous Avaya awards, most notably the Service Excellence Award 2015 and Technical Excellence Award 2014.

Wirebird, acquired by Timico Technology Group in 2015, is rebranding as Timico Technology Services. Nabeil Samara, MD, said: "Our portfolios of managed networks, UC and managed IT services are a natural fit. We are now in a position to offer our customers a holistic end-to-end solution."

Cisco is to acquire CliQr Technologies in a \$260m cash deal. Rob Salvagno, VP, Cisco Corporate Development, said: "With CliQr, Cisco will be able to help our customers realise the promise of the cloud and easily manage the lifecycle of their applications on any hybrid cloud environment."

Comms-care is stepping up its apprenticeship campaign with plans to recruit six more youngsters this year. Darren Briscoe, Technical Director, said: "Our apprenticeships feed new talent into the IT engineering pool by providing apprentices with the skills, experience and certifications they need to contribute to the industry's future."

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Druva drives into channel Provista rallies in tenth year

CLOUD DR specialist Druva has sharpened its focus on the UK channel and signed up two new partners, infrastructure and networking specialist LAN2LAN and service provider Oriium.

They will offer data protection and governance services for mobile and distributed data, including data hosted in the cloud such as Office 365.

Druva has also launched a dedicated partner portal for MSPs alongside a new management platform that runs converged data protection services for customers based on the public cloud.

Working with MSPs, Druva aims to offer data back-up and governance solutions using Amazon Web Services and Microsoft Azure. "The focus is the public cloud with the likes of AWS and a concentration on expanding in UK&I, DACH, Nordics, Benelux and Iberia," said Rick Powles, Vice President EMEA at Druva.

"The channels are all different – some are cloud specialists, others are traditional resellers with growing MSP business, but there is no one vertical market.

"Some have offered disaster recovery and protection, but



Rick Powles

based on servers, and they have nothing for end users with tablets and phones.

"Druva has a strong mobile story and data protection requirements are evolving as companies make more use of cloud computing and employees seek to work where it best suits them, rather than solely working in the office.

"This means that traditional data protection tools are no longer fit for purpose.

"Providing a data availability and governance solution can help MSPs fill the gaps that are developing in their customers' data protection strategies.

"This is not just about protecting end points, apps should also be protected."

HAMILTON-based Cisco partner Provista UK is forecasting sales to jump by a third this year and is advancing plans to boost staff numbers but almost 30%.

The firm celebrates its tenth anniversary this year and is targeting £7m annual revenue, up from £5.6m in 2015.

Director Stuart Little said: "Ten years ago, a few of us spotted what we believed to be a real opportunity in the market, the need for an independent firm to offer expert consultants, right through to the build, supply and maintenance of technological, network and video solutions.

"Since then it has been a decade of cautious but consistent growth, using profits to expand organically, while making sure we retain the culture of our brand.

"With that careful attention and by sticking to our ethos of placing the customer at the heart of operations, we have been able to grow to the scale whereby we can deliver solutions for a client of any size, anywhere in the UK."

Provista specialises in UC, secure wireless, IP security and IP LAN and WAN networks. Its clients include Baillie Gifford, Wood Mackenzie, Canadian



Stuart Little

Natural, Scottish Parliament and Greater Glasgow NHS.

The firm currently has 30 staff and aims to expand into the north of England. "It is a truly exciting time to be part of Provista UK," added Little. "We are still the underdogs compared to household names but we truly believe we have an offering that goes above and beyond.

"Our team have experience in security, wireless, data and voice solutions, with particular expertise in unified IP converged environments. In an ever-changing industry we can't wait for what will be a hugely exciting next ten years."

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

SHORT CALL

Nimans has introduced Panasonic UC Pro to its product line up, a new software-based UC suite that complements the vendor's NS series of comms systems. The new solution has a capacity for 2,500 users and offers video calling, presence, pop-up alerts, text messaging, group chats and calendar integration.

snom's new Innovation-Output platform allows developers to create integrated applications into snom's IO ready IP business phones. These enable the phone to host personal, business, video, IoT, vertical and PBX apps. Nadahl Shocair, Group CEO, said: "This will enable businesses to utilise more sophisticated and specific functions for their people."

8x8 has added new features to its cloud-based Virtual Contact Centre (VCC) solution, introducing the integration of management capabilities, analytics and a pre-built CRM integration tool that allows contact centre managers to configure and tailor the agent and customer experience without requiring professional services.

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CBI's aiming to stay in EU



Carolyn Fairbairn

THE CBI is to make the economic case to stay in the EU having affirmed a strong member mandate in an independent survey by ComRes.

In the survey, 80% of CBI member firms (which together employ nearly 7 million people, circa one third of private sector employees) say that it would be in the best interests of their business and the wider UK economy to remain inside the EU. Just 5% think it is in their firms' best interests for the UK to leave the EU, with 15% unsure.

Carolyn Fairbairn, CBI Director General, said: "The message from our members is resounding. Most want the UK to stay in the EU because it is better for their business, jobs and prosperity.

"Our members say that having guaranteed access to a tariff-free market of 500 million people, and over 30 global trade deals covering 50 countries, are significant advantages that outweigh the frustrations.

"Most CBI members are unconvinced that alternatives to full membership would offer the same opportunities. We have yet to see those who seek to leave the EU present a compelling vision of what this would mean for jobs and growth.

"It is not our place to tell people how to vote, but the CBI will play its role in making the economic case for remaining in the EU."

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EIGHT students from Bury College got to grips with comms during a tour at distributor Nimans where they experienced an interactive presentation and learned how phone systems and two-way radios work. Nimans' event organiser Sue Goldfine said: "Many had never been in a work environment before and were excited to be visiting us. It was a rewarding experience as the young people were enthusiastic and keen to discover more."

Boylett to scale high mountain

ROB Boylett, founder of Business Phones & Networks, will be joining England rugby hero Jason Leonard in an attempt to scale north Africa's highest peak, Mount Toubkal, in aid of the Atlas Foundation (created by leading rugby players to support projects that relieve human suffering).

The challenge will take place over May 6th-9th and the group will be led by mountaineer Rhys Jones and supported by a doctor, guides and porters.

"Mount Toubkal is the highest peak in North Africa at 14,000 feet," commented Boylett. "It'll be tough, but sometimes making it hard is the best way to remind ourselves about the suffering others have to endure on a daily basis.

"I'm committed to raising £10k, along with a bunch of guys who are supporting Jason Leonard as we endeavour to make a total of £100k."



Rob Boylett

SHORT CALL

Ann Potterton is to reprise her role as ITP CEO following a two year break from the post, returning in June 2016. She takes over from Adam Oliver and will focus on promoting the career development of ITP members and its apprenticeship scheme. Chairman Lucy Woods said: "Ann will also ensure that the ITP is a strong advocate for the industry at all levels of private and public enterprises."

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Lux pledges UC shake up Elitetele.com's big M&A hire



Russell Lux

START-UP hosted UC provider TelcoSwitch has entered the fray with guns blazing, emphatically throwing down the gauntlet to established comms providers and driving a 100% channel focused push into the market.

The company launched last year as a supplier of unified turnkey hosted telephony services to the channel and is currently onboarding three partners per week to resell its product suite including CallSwitch, SimSwitch, NetSwitch and SipSwitch, all designed for large and small businesses.

CEO Russell Lux has pinned his hopes on the 'intuitive and

simple' nature of TelcoSwitch's platform and the strength of its partner programme.

"Organisations of all shapes, sizes and industries are waking up to the business benefits that can be gained by having an effective communication platform installed within their business network," stated Russell.

"TelcoSwitch has created a unified turnkey open standards hosted telephony platform and we believe its has the ability to shake things up and challenge established market players.

"We will not rest on our laurels and have ambitious, aggressive growth targets."

THE appointment of Gareth McIntegart as Legal Counsel by Elitetele.com underscores the firm's M&A growth ambitions.

McIntegart joins from global law firm DLA Piper and his appointment to the newly created role follows a long standing business relationship with Elitetele.com CEO and founder Matt Newing.

Newing commented: "We've worked closely with Gareth over the last 10 years during which time we have successfully completed 12 acquisitions. It seemed a natural progression to bring him in house.

"Gareth will aid us further with our planned growth strategy which will include both organic expansion and growth by acquisition."

Elitetele.com has acquired businesses from telecoms, IT, mobile, data centre and connectivity sectors. The company recently secured a further £20m in funding for future acquisitions.

McIntegart commented: "I've always had a great working relationship with Matt and the Elite team and I'm sure my background and experience to date will stand me in good stead for this new chapter."



Gareth McIntegart

Alex Cliffe, Director of M&A, added: "2016 will be another significant year for us with the funding that we now have available. We're an agile buyer with the team and processes in place to enable us to move fast."

SHORT CALLS

Alternative Networks has issued a profit warning following 'significant ongoing pressures' on its mobile business, namely on roaming revenue and profitability arising from a combination of increased network competition and the regulatory headwinds carriers currently face.

Gamma's new SIP Trunk Call Manager software solution will give end user inbound customers the opportunity to manage their own numbers via a portal and app. Available from May, the product is aimed at giving Gamma partners an edge when persuading customers to move to SIP trunks from ISDN.

PLAN.COM just missed out on a semi-final place in KPMG's first seven-a-side charity soccer tournament on the Isle of Man in



support of Wish Upon A Dream. The charity grants wishes for sick and terminally ill children living on the island, and in a show of support 12 teams battled to lift the trophy, including representations from PokerStars, SMP, Barclays, Appleby and Baker Tilly. plan.com team captain and Marketing Manager Simon Jennings said: "The tournament was a great success with such a brilliant turn out of teams and local support. In this case, it wasn't just about winning."

SHORT CALL

Genius Networks has advanced its expansion plans with two new London-based appointments. Amit Chhabra joins as Technical Pre-sales while Jonathan Bunney becomes Channel Director with a remit to grow and strengthen the channel business. James Arnold-Roberts, CEO, said: "Investing in top talent is a priority for us and these appointments will be integral to our growth strategy."

On track to train

CLARANET has ensured that customers maximise their user experience with a ramp-up of its training operation.

The company is working with Train to Win.tv which offers web-based and on-site telecoms training.

James Mitchell, Claranet's UC Product Manager, said: "We want our customers to get the most from our services and an important part of this is understanding the full range of features available to them. Training has a crucial role to play here.

"While our customers already tell us about the flexibility, efficiency and improvements to customer service that their UC solution provides them, we are always looking to help our customers do more with what they have."

Train to Win.tv MD Julie Mills commented: "We have a shared vision on how best to help customers solve key business challenges."

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ICUK offers 2FA

ICUK has introduced Two Factor Authentication (2FA) as part of version 15.1, providing an additional layer of security over and above a password.

2FA also allows control panel users to leverage third party applications to generate time sensitive codes.

"We're not using proprietary code generators, we give 2FA users the ability to pick between using an app on their smartphone or built into their browser," commented Paul Barnett, Director of ICUK.

2FA is available as an option for all reseller control panels and end user interfaces.

"Resellers can choose to enforce this as standard or give their clients the choice," added Barnett. "We hope that the introduction of 2FA leads to proactive thinking about portal security and raises awareness about how sensitive data can be in the wrong hands.

"As awareness of online security increases this feature can be introduced into the sales processes to instil confidence."



IOVOX hunts for partners

CALL analytics firm IOVOX has set its sights on global expansion via a ramped up channel model. The company has launched an affiliate scheme designed to extend its reach through local reseller partners.

"Customers like to buy from people and companies they trust," commented Ryan Gallagher, founder and CEO.

IOVOX has customers in 32 countries that use its analytics services to make call data visual, actionable, and as useful as web data.

"Instead of trying to interpret a monthly phone bill to derive answers to important business questions, IOVOX provides businesses with a simple to use, easy to interpret, real-time dashboard to measure call performance," added Gallagher.

"By using data to reveal the truth about call performance, IOVOX helps businesses improve efficiency, deliver better customer service and become more profitable.

IOVOX also launched its Insights solution last month which transforms static call data into a rich seam of visual and actionable information, claims the company.

"Traditional phone bills don't tell a story of business performance," added Gallagher. "This can be debilitating if a company relies on phone leads.

"But once a business realises they are missing 20% or more of their calls during certain periods of the day, they immediately recognise the value of dynamic and interactive analytics.

"IOVOX Insights enables service providers to lock in existing revenue while creating a foundation for up-selling."

Gallagher also explained that the Insights solution enables tracking and visualisation of many data points and, among other platforms, it integrates with BroadSoft.

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AN EVENT put on by Venus Business Communications provided a platform for the company to introduce new features and services that have been developed based in partner feedback. The 'Bet on Red' partner event, held at The London Hippodrome, showcased the availability of 10Gbit/sec fibre to premises Internet, a capacity increase of the Venus backhaul network, development of the new Venus portal (to be officially released later this year) and the introduction of a premium DDoS mitigation service.

Brian Iddon, Director, said: "For the Venus partner programme to expand and prosper we need to listen to our partners and understand what they need to help their businesses grow. Venus has recently introduced white label marketing, product training and dedicated project management to our growing base of partners. We're a dynamic business and this is just the beginning."

SHORT CALLS

US-based endpoint protection and threat intelligence company CrowdStrike is strengthening its presence in the EMEA market on the back of a 200% rise in sales last year. The company has set up a corporate office in the UK and hired Michael East, who previously held a senior sale role at FireEye's EMEA, as its VP of EMEA Sales.

Diva Telecom has launched a Republic of Ireland WLR and CPS service to channel partners. The company's MD Erica Lewis commented: "Diva Telecom has always been a niche player in the telecoms market. The Republic of Ireland WLR and CPS service offers a means to engage with customers on a new geographic level."

Wearables in the enterprise have sparked a wave of security concerns according to Centrifly. In its research, 69% of wearable device owners say they forego login credentials (such as PINs, passwords, fingerprint scanners and voice recognition) when accessing their devices. "IT departments must take serious steps to protect wearables as carefully as they do laptops and smartphones," said Bill Mann, Chief Product Officer.

Mirakl has expanded its partner programme across Europe following the success of its UK operations. The Paris-based provider of software solutions says it will begin recruiting new partners under its BLINK partner programme and the firm expects to triple its UK business this year, and has plans to hire pre-sales, sales and solution staff for its London office.

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The industry Benchmark

Navigating an insightful course through deep oceans of billing data has until now been near impossible. But one captain of industry has pushed for this Holy Grail with an insistent hand, and data can no longer keep its secrets to itself in Union Street's partner Benchmarking report.

In data analytics, as in billing, Union Street Technologies is blazing a trail with the launch of Benchmarking, a free analytics service that enables reseller partners to compare their business performance against industry averages. The results are derived from a large sample of Union Street's client base and represent a good knowledge base for statistical reliability. In practice, Union Street's Benchmarking service breaks out significant data and then segments it into a number of categories that, for example, signpost performance indicators, pinpoint missed growth opportunities and areas where growth inhibiting factors may need to be overcome.

Managing Director Tony Cook said: "By harvesting anonymised data from our aBILLity billing platform Benchmarking provides reseller partners with valuable business insights, comparing their performance with that of the wider industry. These include reports on revenue growth, profit margin, charge rates and how revenues are split."

With over 450 reseller partners using the aBILLity billing platform Union Street's customer base represents a significant proportion of resellers operating in the UK. "The consolidated data harvested will provide a strong industry

benchmark average, and a valuable indication of business performance for resellers against their peers," added Cook.

The quest for clarity of strategic vision must lie in converting every drop of gathered data into meaningful information that captures a number of important and relevant trends. But there are no magic bullets, and the work put in by Union Street developers has been, and continues to be, praiseworthy. Union Street developed Benchmarking in response to what it believes is a growing awareness within the channel and the wider business community of the opportunities presented by data analysis.

Business driver

Union Street's Head of Sales and Marketing, Vincent Disneur, explained: "Analytics is driving businesses forward in all sorts of ways. As organisations start to integrate and share information across common platforms and APIs, new types of business data are created offering valuable perspectives on industry and company performance. Companies operating across the communications sector will pay ever closer attention to their data to gain deeper insights into customer preferences, behavioural patterns and how best to respond.



Tony Cook (left) and Vincent Disneur

"Benchmarking is a significant extension of this practice and we're the first company within the channel that has developed meaningful analytics based on billing data. By sharing this information with our

partners we can help them visualise their business, improve performance and better understand their relative competitiveness."

Benchmarking tells us that it's real details, not flimsy

forecasts, that should give direction to strategic thinking, so Cook is urging all partners to opt into the service. "The reporting utilises rolling average data collected securely and anonymously from

that matters

the previous 12 months," added Cook. "When we refer to an industry average in the reports we are not claiming that this is a precise figure as it is simply derived from the CPs who have subscribed to this.

"However, we believe that once we have a minimum of 200 reseller partners included the sample will be large enough to provide averages that closely reflect the industry as a whole. The Benchmarking reports only use high level information and the averages do not identify any individual CP other than the one receiving their own unique reports. We do not collect or publish any data that could be used to identify any of their end user customers."

It is worth exploring at this point a snapshot of some of the analytical data already available (what follows is only a sample of the full reporting capabilities). The Revenue Growth Ranking report compares a partner's average revenue growth with that of other resellers. This rate is compared against the industry average and also against the average found among the top performing ten per cent of CPs.

The Margin Ranking Report compares average profit margin to the industry average and the top 10 per cent performers. The report also shows an absolute ranking position in a sample of over 100, and highlights any deviation from the average margin. The Revenue Growth Report displays as a percentage the month-to-month growth in revenue for a partner's business, which is represented on a graph. Using the graph users can

The quest for clarity of strategic vision must lie in converting every drop of gathered data into meaningful information that captures trends

also compare the revenue growth of their business with the industry average.

The percentage split between revenue generated by calls and services is presented in the Calls and Services Report. And the Revenue by Call Type Report displays in percentage terms how a partner's revenues generated by calls are split between voice, mobile, local rate, national rate, GPRS received, freephone and ISDN data. More call data is detailed in the Revenue by Carrier Report which explains how a partner's wholesale expenditure is split by carrier and then compared to the industry average across other comms providers.

It is not hard to sense the expectation surrounding the benefits that Benchmarking offers to participating partners, especially when you consider the priority Union Street has placed on ensuring the accuracy and broad range of its insight reporting. "To ensure that anomalous readings will

not distort the reports the Union Street team has taken steps to smooth the data featured in the Benchmarking service," said Cook. "In order to avoid anomalies caused by CPs with exceptional or freak billing figure we use the 95th percentile method when calculating the averages. By ignoring the top and bottom five per cent of samples the overall average is closer to a realistic industry benchmark."

Once a billing period is closed in aBILlity, statistics are automatically submitted to Union Street via a secure web service. When a minimum of 50 reseller partners have submitted their data the statistics for the billing period they have contributed to will be made visible on a web-based dashboard. Industry averages are recalculated daily as more resellers submit their monthly statistics.

For Union Street, there is no such thing as data-lite, and its reporting is incontrovertibly insightful, reliable and almost without boundaries, believes Cook. "As Benchmarking gains traction it will help Union Street's partners to spot trends in sales of certain services early on, so they can focus their sales and marketing activities on those areas accordingly," he added.

"The Benchmarking Service will initially feature eight key reports. However, due to the flexible architecture of our system new reports can be added without limit. We actively encourage our partners to submit feedback and share their ideas for how our solutions can be developed, and this will be essential to the development of our Benchmarking service going forward."



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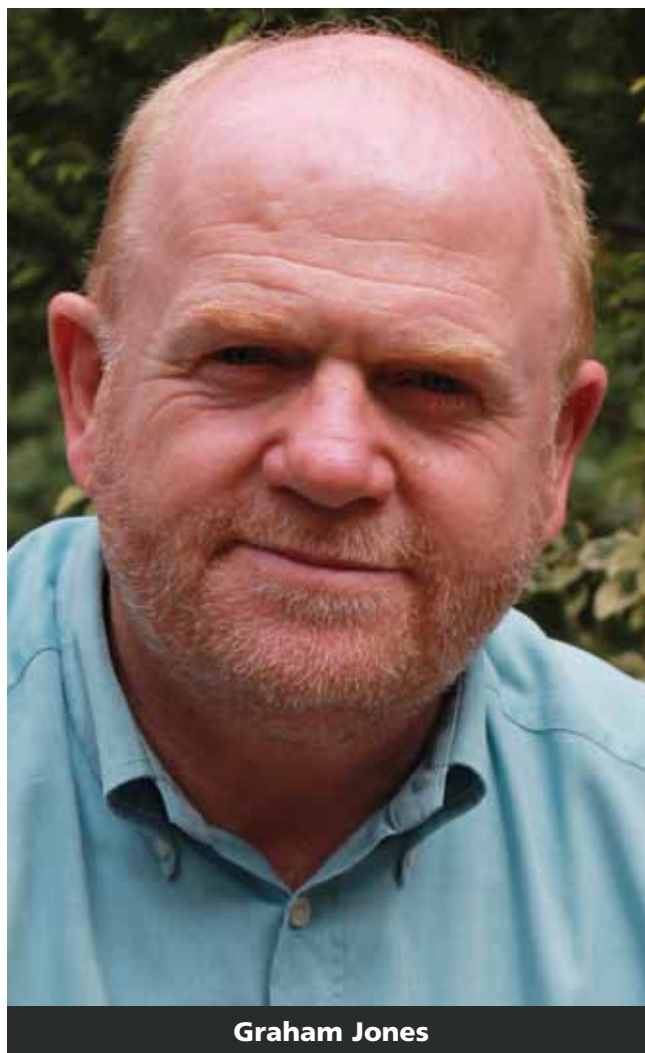
Exclusive Networks UK Managing Director Graham Jones explains how Attila the Hun helped to turn a page in his life's narrative and start a new chapter in the distributor's UK story.

Exclusive Group racked up organic growth of 31 per cent and total revenues of 1.4 billion euro in 2015. Acquisitions helped to push the distributor past the one billion annual revenues target nearly two years ahead of plan, and a strong performance in the UK generated 55-plus per cent yearly growth under the leadership of Jones. He hasn't always flown so high, having nose dived to a career low point earlier in his working life. But the experience proved to be a springboard of great significance.

Down on his luck, Jones found inspiration from a book on Attila the Hun, developed new perspectives on doing business and was revitalised when he plugged his career prospects into the Exclusive Networks powerhouse. "Being out of work for a year and a half was challenging," he stated. "You find out who your real friends are and you realise how quickly your network can evaporate. Joining Exclusive Networks UK in 2012 reinvigorated me in many respects. I brought my new perspective when I came back into the industry and it's proven to be invaluable."

To say Jones does business by the book would be an overstatement and simplistic, but nonetheless it is an accurate assessment of one of the biggest influences on his career path. "I was luckily enough to meet Tom Day who wrote an incredible book called *The Leadership Secrets of Attila the Hun*, which explored business warfare," he added. "How Atilla won his crusades is translated into a business context. These perspectives gave me a great understanding and new outlook on how to approach business."

Jones's own story is characterised by a fighting spirit and a flare for turning adversity into a triumph of self-determination, a trait that helped to set him on his career path in technology at an early age. "I wasn't particularly interested in school and failed most of my A Levels," he stated. "The only course available to me was Computer Studies at Liverpool Polytechnic. Luckily, I excelled, passing with two distinctions and caught the IT bug. I then met a guy who was opening the first microcomputer shop in the UK, in Liverpool, and eventually went to work with him. I sold one of the first Apple computers in the UK,



Graham Jones

which is now housed in a science museum in London."

Scaling up growth

Fast forward to July 2012, Jones breezed out of the doldrums and became Country Manager at Exclusive Networks with a remit to scale up for growth. "I have restructured the business slowly over three years and now have a great leadership team and great people, all key to a strong and agile company," he said. "That's played a huge role in our year-on-year growth and our strategy, which we continually refine. Keeping our character and culture will be key to maintaining that growth trajectory and passing the half billion mark in the UK by 2020."

These stellar figures show how far the company has travelled. It began life as an IT VAD called Techniland based in France. Olivier Breittmayer, CEO, advanced the idea that 'exclusivity' in channel partnerships based on a shared vision and mutual support should have more presence than just strategic policy, so Techniland underwent a rebrand to Exclusive Networks, a name that reflected the firm's key messages.

Its acquisition of VADition was the first big milestone in the UK. Other turning points were achieved when the Group hit the billion euro mark and the UK arm reached 200 million euro. In terms of future revenue,

Jones expects to see more software driven solution sales with an increased uptake of cloud services, although he's not yet clear on what that means for Exclusive. "Will we become a cloud aggregator, or offer our own cloud to the SMB base? This is going to be an ongoing challenge for all distributors over the next few years," he commented.

The ever-changing nature of the security market also keeps Jones on his toes and he is ready to move quickly in response to industry developments. "In many ways we're totally driven by the hackers," he stated. "As the security market becomes more mainstream we are seeing a lot more people try and treat it as a commodity. That doesn't work. You've got to have the back-up, the tech, the pre-sales, the marketing and account mapping with vendors, while helping our VARs grow their businesses. We are consultants to our VARs and, in turn, VARs should be the same to their customers. The VARs being acquired are the ones who understand this."

Jones is keeping a keen eye on trends like security-as-a-service having witnessed a change from shipping lots of hard and software to simply providing license keys. "A main strand in our growth strategy is staying close to good vendors like Fortinet and Palo Alto," he commented. "We evolve with them to fill any gaps that come from their growth. Our approach has always been striking a balance between changing our strategy daily while also standing still. It's about being consistent while remaining agile enough to move with the times. It's a fine art to get right." ■



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Channel's finding its feet

Analyst projections on the boundless revenue potential for M2M continue to spill forth, but the channel's ability to deliver on the promise has been conspicuously limited – until now.

The path down which M2M resellers are being led by pioneers such as Zest4 is certain to become a road to riches if analyst predictions are to be believed. The early signs are that reseller business leaders who take responsibility and decide to enter the M2M arena are already gaining ground, having taken their education seriously, developed the confidence to sell M2M solutions, and added opportunism into the mix. Staunch support from supplier partners will underpin these basic requirements, and Zest4's experience mirrors this development path.

Its first foray into the M2M space was indicative of a market finding its feet. However, Zest4's baby steps soon extended into strides of certainty as the company marched towards channel-ready status. "When we first offered M2M to our resellers we assumed the opportunities would start flowing, similar to mobile business," said Mandy Fazelynia, Operations and Business Development Director. "But we underestimated the complexity of M2M and IoT and soon realised that every solution is different, requiring bespoke security, tariffs, commercials and pre and post-sales support. Our partners value their customer relationships and are cautious about quoting for new solutions when

they are not 100 per cent confident in them. This led us to completely re-think our approach to ensure we had the infrastructure to provide that confidence and make the opportunity come to life for our partners."

The role of partnerships is fundamental to the success of M2M. Zest4 has partnered with Arkessa which provides the technical know-how required by these solutions. Arkessa has over 10 years experience in providing M2M solutions and has trained the Zest4 team to understand how M2M solutions apply to all market sectors, and it provides additional technical support for more complex requirements. "As a result of this partnership we have developed a partner enablement and training programme to ensure that resellers achieve success and confidently win new business," added Fazelynia. "We have extended the Zest4 Partner Academy to include M2M training and built a tool-kit of materials that enable partners to offer M2M solutions."

M2M applications are already evident in many major UK cities. Although not specifically an M2M solution, users of London Underground have rapidly adopted the use of contactless debit cards to pay for their travel. "Contactless card transactions have exceeded one million per day, which is a strong indicator of how the public is



Mandy Fazelynia

embracing the convenience of mobile and card payment systems, and how these technologies can help with customer flow," added Fazelynia. "By adopting M2M solutions, bus, taxi and train companies can also offer their customers the same levels of convenience. With the implementation of mobile payment systems (mPOS), passengers could also enjoy easy on-board payment facilities."

Quick wins

M2M technology can also help taxi and bus companies improve their customer experience by offering mobile Wi-Fi access. Tourists, local visitors and business people are becoming increasingly dependent on connectivity while on the move. By providing mobile Wi-Fi access, customers will be able to plan their next hotel

enabling them to confidently move into this new arena. With our support, partners are finding quick wins in taxi solutions, public transport and logistics. They are also beginning to uncover opportunities in retail, leisure and healthcare market sectors, opening up further potential for the future."

The initial stages of plan.com's entry into M2M focused on raising awareness of M2M propositions in the reseller channel. This prompted the take-up of basic M2M solutions with minimum levels of required input. But within a short period of time the propositions started to change, involving the delivery of more detailed and complex solutions including job dispatch management, street light control and large scale mobile Wi-Fi deployments. "Now, we're dealing with a much wider scope of M2M solutions and significantly larger propositions," said plan.com's co-founder Keith Curran.

The firm's proposition focuses on the mobile connectivity of the M2M device. The company offers complete SIM provision and once connected it provides real-time monitoring and management of every aspect of the customer's account including SIM management, billing and reporting. "Our strategic aim is to provide the connectivity for all areas of M2M propositions as opposed to focusing on a

stay and keep up-to-date with their workload during their journey. "Signage is another area of growth that we're seeing in the M2M market, which, together with mobile Wi-Fi offers a great opportunity to fund the service through advertising and sponsorship activity," added Fazelynia.

She noted that Zest4's mobile reseller partners are the early adopters of M2M, exploring their existing customer base to identify opportunities. "These resellers have knowledge of mobile networks so the move into M2M is a natural progression for them," added Fazelynia. "IT resellers are also keen to get on-board. Their experience and knowledge of security and firewalls, and the integration of M2M/IoT solutions into an existing IT infrastructure is

in race to M2M

specific device proposition," said Curran. "Resellers play a key part in our strategy as they essentially have the relationship and realise the propositions with end user customers. We currently have relationships with over 500 resellers."

It is only relatively recently that resellers have started to understand and get on board with the potential of M2M. With many resellers being new to this still largely unknown area of business, plan.com needed to develop a consultative approach as opposed to being a simple supplier. "Resellers are enthusiastic to adopt and sell M2M propositions but they've also highlighted a strong requirement for hands-on support, which is something we have embraced and delivered," added Curran. "This can range from basic training to joint customer visits to help support, advise and often hand-hold the sales process."

There is an array of opportunities for resellers, not just with new customers but also in identifying the M2M requirements within their existing customer base. The obvious areas of opportunity are currently in transport, energy and security. "The core opportunities include vehicle tracking and logistics management, alternative energy propositions such as wind turbines, and both fixed and mobile security installations that don't just use the SIM to transmit live data but also as a back-up should typical methods of Internet connectivity fail," explained Curran.

He also pointed to future trends in areas such as

medical and retail. "We are hearing a lot about the Smart Home, but this technology is also relevant to the office environment, the key areas including temperature and security management and control," added Curran. "Many M2M technology solutions will be adopted by local Government as part of their efficiency and cost reduction programmes. This represents a massive opportunity for the reseller channel. Those resellers who get in early will be seen as experts in the M2M space, simply because there are very few resellers from any channel really embracing M2M."

SIM central

The natural partner profile for M2M is the mobile reseller. But there is another key channel which to date has shied away from the SIM – IT resellers – and with all roads leading to the SIM this channel is starting to see ways of increasing their profits by supplying the same meat and drink devices and solutions but also with the connectivity/SIM. "For all channels there is still a need for education," commented Curran. "This needs to be taken on board by the networks as well as key distributors. We work closely with the network and for large or more complex propositions we will often both visit the customer with the partner to provide the support to help secure the deal."

For resellers wanting to develop M2M business, Curran offered some top tips on qualifying, demonstrating, selling and closing M2M deals. "Don't be afraid to have a go," he stated. "You won't necessarily be up

against a massive array of competitors. Invariably you will be the only reseller in the room. A little knowledge goes a long way and puts you on the front foot from the beginning of the engagement. We focus on helping resellers gain this basic knowledge, but they must be willing to learn and adopt a positive 'how difficult can it be?' approach. This way they get to understand the solution and secure the customer contract."

Pangea's Managing Director, Dan Cunliffe, suggested that the slow uptake of M2M by the channel could in part be attributed to pre-conceptions about the term 'M2M'. "From a channel perspective we are finding that M2M has a certain connotation," he said. "It's part of the education piece to understand that this market is about using data in a smart way to drive a solution. For example, a partner of ours had not thought about offering a fleet management solution to their existing customers. Most organisations generally have at least two vehicles. The partner explored whether their services could extend to the fleet, and then asked about creating a private Wi-Fi network for all the vehicles in the company."

"The total contract value of that deal was between £250,000 and £300,000 for the partner. This is just one example, but it came out of the training and sales support being offered to our clients. Developing IoT business is all about collaborating with the right partner that understands the channel, has credibility and most importantly knows where the value lies in the market." ■



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Growth plan to inspire

plan.com's remarkable growth trajectory must lift the spirits of all ambitious channel players with business expansion on their mind.

There is no doubting the drive that propels plan.com. The mobile distributor made its first connection in May 2014 and is already aiming to become a billion pound company, its ambitions fuelled largely by partner recruitment and an all-singing, all-dancing portal. "Our formula when we entered the channel was simple – ask partners what they want, listen to what they say and deliver it," said Chris Smith, Head of Business Development. "We expect to have over 550 partners signed up by the end of Q2 and the rate of recruitment has been consistently high since we signed up our first partner in April 2014."

Smith has no intention of relinquishing his growth objectives, which will soon be bolstered by initiatives to turn whole swaths of prospective partners into enthusiastic mobile, IoT and hosted VoIP providers, two service areas that have proved to be among the richest resources of revenue generation in the company's experience to date. "We expect our mobile base to double in 2016 and again in 2017," he added. "We are seeing strong growth across our other products with the standout areas being IoT and hosted VoIP, both of which are on target to contribute over 25

per cent of total revenues within the next 12 months."

With so many enthusiastic partners working on delivering next generation technologies, plan.com's channel engagement has naturally shifted up a gear. "We have been surprised by the speed of our growth, and impressed by how quickly our mobile partners have been adopting new products such as IoT and Hosted VoIP," commented Smith. "For partners, the first deal with a new product requires some handholding, thereafter they are flying. We have many success stories already, from a two-man business winning a significant IoT contract to a partner going from having never connected VoIP to more than 100 connections per month in less than six months."

"We see opportunities everywhere we look. In the partner channel there is a massive opportunity for dealers, partners and resellers of all shapes and sizes to add new products to their portfolios quickly and easily. We have already seen a large proportion of our mobile partners take up IoT and hosted VoIP and are starting to see IT resellers getting into mobile. The portal enables partners to build out their portfolios, drive revenues and profitability



Chris Smith

We have a high level roadmap and 'one billion pound company' is our destination

and become suppliers of unified comms. This alone will keep us busy for years."

Thinking big

Traditionally, noted Smith, the partner channel focuses on delivering to the 'one-man band', SoHo and micro to mid-SME space. "However, we have found that our proposition has enabled even the smallest of partners to compete and capture business with customers involving thousands of devices," he commented. "We have mobile partners selling hosted VoIP and IT resellers selling mobile. And we have everybody selling IoT and embracing that

opportunity. We all know that IoT is going to be huge, and we have made significant inroads by leveraging the power of our portal to enable partners to quickly build customised IoT quotes and then wrap around a team of experts to support and handhold our partners to help them win business."

Having extolled the merits of a supportive team it follows that 'people power' plays a key role in the company's customer engagement strategy and growth ambitions. To underline its commitment to growth and to support the role of partners in its business

plan.com has made a trio of important hires as it moves into a new phase of expansion. Angie Ablard joins as Head of Sales this month, Chris Reilly was appointed Training Manager in March, and Dominic Barnes joined from Carphone Warehouse in February where he was one of its most senior and successful BDMs. "We have positioned the team for the next stage of our growth," added Smith. "The fact that we have been able to secure high calibre individuals is also testament to the position we have achieved in the market in a short space of time."

Smith declared himself ready to welcome partners from all backgrounds, and his strong embrace is made possible by plan.com's advanced portal which also functions as a gateway for partners to enter new markets. "We set out to provide a proposition that allows all partners to literally become the network operator," he commented. "The tools put partners in the shoes of the operator, enabling them to offer proactive customer service which drives loyalty and retention."

"At the same time, we give partners freedom and control, allowing them to manage their business from anywhere in the world on a laptop, tablet or mobile. There is a significant opportunity to offer the portal to audiences outside our traditionally mobile-centric base, and get more partners onboard to sell more of our products. We have a high level roadmap and 'one billion pound company' is our destination. We'll write the story as we progress, seizing existing opportunities and creating new ones on the journey." ■

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Adams the Digitaliser

Turning non-technical industries into digital players is the fine art of Fifteen Digital Managing Director Robert Adams, who, for example, is helping the crisping market to make a packet.

Adams first encountered the world of IT at the age of three when his father bought him a computer. Three years later Adams was a dab hand at programming and needless to say he was already on a career path, deepening his knowledge and experience at school, achieving a high level of expertise that was recognised when he came second in the National Computing Awards. Perhaps it was the number-crunching of computer programming that diverted Adams from his destiny into a surprising career choice. "After leaving school I became an accountant," he said. "But I always had a passion for technology and at the age of 21 went self-employed to start up an IT business called Anet with my brother Mark."

Fifteen Digital was incorporated in February 2006 following a link-up with 15 Digital Marketing owned by John Borthwick. "Myself and John met through a mutual client and the digital marketing and IT skills we shared was obvious," added Adams. "We decided to merge the two businesses into one with the Stoke-based company offering marketing and technology solutions."

The following year Fifteen Digital started to offer web development and James Tierney joined the firm as Developers Director. "Three years later we opened up a second office in Darlington to replicate the success we had in the west midlands," explained Adams.

A more significant development in April 2014 saw Fifteen Digital purchase B2B Telecoms business Sitelink Communications, with Ian Walker coming on board as Communications Director. "Acquiring a telecoms business allowed us to broaden our range of services as well as our portfolio of clients," commented Adams. "Moving into full specification business transformation services enabled Fifteen Digital to provide a whole solution, permitting businesses to work towards their goals while we support their development more efficiently."

Last year's revenues reached over £1 million and the company now employs 27 staff with plans to double the headcount by 2019. Target markets include franchisor clients, leisure and entertainment brands, retailers, manufacturing firms, construction companies, training and recruitment



Robert Adams

agencies, health and beauty services, plus many more, including crisp makers.

Crisp business

"The creation of our Agritech solution has been a great success," explained Adams. "It now supports 20 per cent of the UK's crisping markets. This particular project allowed us to bring technology to an industry that's not normally considered hi-tech. This shows the benefits that technology can bring to any business. One of our biggest opportunities is our specialism of developing provenance and trace solutions. In 2015 we won the Business Enabler Award at the Lloyds Bank National Business Awards. This was for our collaborative partnership with a large crisping potato provider which led us to create the LiveTrace system."

The LiveTrace system provides provenance and traceability over all produce to the full supply chain, ensuring food safety regulations and standards are met. "The system has revolutionised our client's business through efficiency and effectiveness," said Adams. "A challenge we face is encouraging low tech industries to adopt technology in their business areas. We have demonstrated the importance and benefits of applying smart technology to business activities.

"It's now a case of sharing these benefits and encouraging more companies to get on board and transform their business for the better. We have found a niche for supporting companies that aren't technical by helping them to become more

technologically advanced. A challenge that Team Fifteen finds inspiring and exciting."

Other challenges include developing and growing the Fifteen Digital team. "Finding new suitable candidates can be problematic, as well as creating training programmes around new technologies for the team to adopt," noted Adams. "The technology market is strong and thriving with new agencies and businesses being established every day. Ensuring that we stand out in a prosperous and growing market is vital."

Two months ago Fifteen Digital kicked off its tenth anniversary celebrations with various activities taking place over the year including a £10,000 fundraiser challenge for local Stoke charity The Donna Louise Children's Hospice. Adams commented: "The past ten years have been exciting for Fifteen Digital, with Team Fifteen doubling in size, regional and national award wins and a growing portfolio of clients and projects." ■

Just a minute with Robert Adams...

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What talent do you wish you had? Pausing time. There aren't enough hours in the day

What do you fear the most? Being alone

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Pete Tomlinson

Eclipse aligns under parent

The 'total eclipse' of the Eclipse name by its parent KCOM within an overall rebrand project will be greeted with ambivalence by some and a degree of surprise, even trepidation by others, so Comms Dealer grabbed an hour with KCOM Director Pete Tomlinson and quizzed him on the thinking behind the strategy and any effect it may have on its partner channel.

For over a decade Eclipse has built a solid reputation with its reseller partners for the support and service it provides in the supply of connectivity and cloud infrastructures to SME and mid-markets in the UK. Originally founded by Mark Langdon as an Internet services business, Eclipse was acquired by KCOM in 2006. Unaudited figures from September 2014 to September 2015 saw Eclipse's revenues up £3 million on the previous year at £29.6 million, and up to September 2015 revenues had already hit £19 million with an EBITDA of £3.9 million. Overall, KCOM Group revenues for 2014/15 were £128.3 million with an EBITDA of £13.1 million.

All this means Eclipse accounted for 30 per cent of Group profits and will perform equally well if not better this financial year. With this in mind our first question for Tomlinson had to be, why fix what wasn't broken? "I think we're rather like a couple that have been living together for the past decade finally deciding to

get married, take the same name and living happily ever after. Changing a name won't change a business, for better or worse," he said. "We are deliberately doing this under a rebranded KCOM and this was the right thing to do. It simplifies our business, brings together our four market facing brands – KCOM, Eclipse, KC and Smart421 – and makes it easier for customers to access all of our capabilities."

Tomlinson confirmed that although the final brand logo was designed by an outside agency the original decision to dissolve the popular Eclipse name and unify the four divisions under the KCOM brand (which has less resonance in the reseller channel) was arrived at democratically within the KCOM Group. "We've been simplifying our business behind the scenes for some time and while we've still some work to do, now was the right time to visibly move our companies to a single brand. This wasn't a directive from some 'outside entity', this was a joint commitment by each of our original Group brands to come together

and give our customers access to all of our expertise. The thinking was driven by our colleagues across the business, but we also believe it is important to bring in outside specialists where they can add value. So it's been a mix of both, but we all had a say in the final decision.

"While moving to a single brand is the most visible thing for customers, it is really something of an evolution across all our brands. I understand some partners will be a little nervous and maybe even sad to see the Eclipse name replaced by KCOM. We get that, but it's the same people supporting them in the same way so they needn't worry."

Brand building

Tomlinson has been instrumental in building the Eclipse brand and its reputation in the channel, so was he and his partners sorry to see it go? "I've had an incredible time leading the transformation of the Eclipse brand over the past four years and I'm amazingly proud of what the team has created. However, for all that time I've also been

part of a wider KCOM Group leadership team, so it's not about leaving something behind, it's about new opportunities for us and our partners.

"I think people can get too hung up on a name. I will always fight to keep everything that Eclipse stood for alive in terms of service, culture and capability. That's really the whole point of bringing the brands together across our organisation. We've been talking to our channel partners throughout the process and made sure that they were informed. Honestly, the reaction has ranged from a resounding 'meh!' to simply 'just don't mess up what we like about you guys', which were both reasonable reactions.

"Our original KCOM brand has a long history in the channel, but we're also aware that recently Eclipse has had a higher profile as a fast growing challenger brand. If we get it right our new KCOM identity has the potential to deliver the best of both worlds. I think we will, but I call on all our partners to challenge us

if ever we don't get right, so we can fix it quickly. Over time our offering will expand but we're very keen to keep our partner portal and the personalities behind it exactly the same."

Tomlinson confirmed that the channel will remain a core part of how the company goes to market. "I'm a firm believer in not having separate 'channel' and 'direct' brands," he added. "In fact, your readers who were at the last Comms Vision event will remember me talking about just this point alongside our Head of Direct Sales when he was running a WAN sales master class for partners."

Tomlinson stressed that one important change from the unification that could be most advantageous to partners will be the opportunity to add extra services to their portfolios. "We have a lot of capability that partners cannot easily access right now, or it's not in a service model that works for them. The unification of our four divisions makes it easier for us to fix that and innovate as one business." ■

Ofcom sets BT agenda

Comms watchdog Ofcom has placed new demands on BT to improve its service, including rules for Openreach to speed up the installation of high speed business lines and reduce wholesale costs, aiming to bring prices down over a three year period from 1st May 2016.

The main charge controls relate to newer Ethernet lines (initial reduction in prices of 12 per cent) and older leased lines using traditional interface technology (initial nine per cent reduction). Ofcom also confirmed that BT's dark fibre network should be accessible to competitors. The announcement follows the regulator's Strategic Review of Digital Communications that outlined plans to impose tougher standards on BT's Openreach division.

Ofcom's report stated that since 2011 the average time between a customer's order and the line being ready has increased from 40 to 48 working days. Ofcom's proposals would require BT to reduce this to 46 working days by the end of March 2017, and return it to 40 working days the following year. The regulator also found that Openreach is failing to complete one in four leased line installations on the stated install date, and is proposing that by

the end of March 2017 Openreach must complete 80 per cent of leased line orders by the date it promises customers, rising to 90 per cent from April 2018.

Ofcom has also said that Openreach must fix at least 94 per cent of faults on its leased line network within five hours. Jonathan Oxley, Ofcom Competition Group Director, said: "These new rules will mean companies across the UK benefit from faster installation times, greater certainty about installation dates and fast repairs if things go wrong."

Ofcom also requires BT to provide access to its optical fibre network, giving competitors physical access to its fibre optic cables and allowing them to take direct control of the connection. Oxley added: "We have outlined plans to reduce the country's reliance on BT's Openreach division. Our proposals on dark fibre do just that, letting BT's competitors better serve their customers by



Jonathan Oxley

These new rules will mean companies benefit from faster installation times

getting direct access to BT's optical fibre cables."

Dark fibre proposals

As part of the dark fibre proposals Ofcom would require BT to publish a draft 'reference offer' for industry, containing wholesale pricing and terms for access by 1st September 2016. This would then be subject to negotiation between BT and other providers, with a view to BT publishing a final reference offer by 1st December 2016. Dark fibre access would then be available to

telecoms providers from 1st October 2017.

The plans form part of Ofcom's Business Connectivity Market Review (BCMR). The new rules will be finalised at the end of April subject to consideration by the European Commission. BT responded quickly to Ofcom's new proposals, saying 'no surprises here'. In a statement the telco asserted that 'there is a strong case for less, not more, regulation'. BT conceded that service improvements are required and believes

that Ofcom's proposals will have a detrimental impact on achieving its aims. The BT statement said, 'The required Ethernet price cuts and the introduction of dark fibre will not help to underpin service improvement'.

In its response to Ofcom's demands, BT described dark fibre as a 'flawed piece of regulation that introduces an unnecessary layer of complexity and will deter others from building their own fibre networks, which is at odds with Ofcom's recent statements about increasing competition at the infrastructure level. It is a cherry pickers charter benefiting those who don't invest in networks at the expense of those who do including BT, Virgin Media, CityFibre and Zayo'.

Mark Collins, Director of Strategy at CityFibre, said: "Ahead of the BCMR consultation we strongly urged Ofcom to ensure that any future approach to regulated pricing in no way distorts the market or discourages investment by independent infrastructure builders. We are in the process of reviewing the BCMR draft statement in detail to determine if Ofcom has achieved the correct balance of access regulation to Openreach's infrastructure with the appropriate incentives to support investment in new independent fibre infrastructure.

"Although Ofcom has recognised that Openreach needs to improve its business service delivery, the addition of dark fibre into its product portfolio will clearly add yet another layer of service and operational complexity." ■



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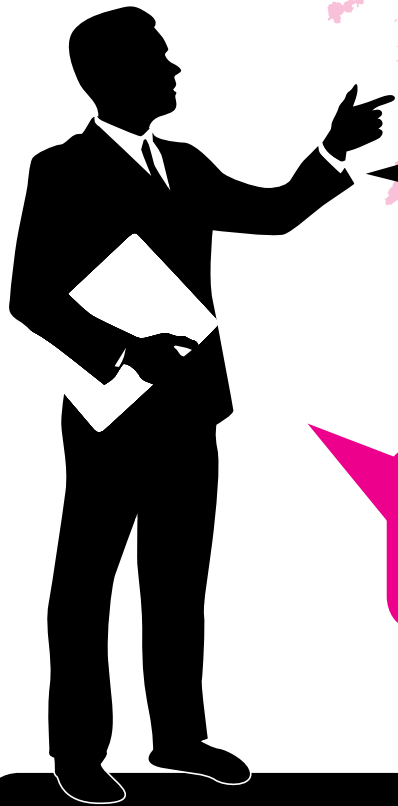
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Speaker line-up



MARK CURTIS WOOD – HEAD OF NIMANS NETWORK SERVICES

In his key note speech, Mark Curtis-Wood will outline how resellers can make the transition from traditional on premise solutions into the cloud and access a new generation of products and services.

For example, new revenue streams from M2M and mobile data will continue to grow and Mark will highlight how resellers can capitalise on hosted and other cloud-based solutions, as the shift from PBX and on premise gathers momentum.



ANDY GRANT – MANAGING DIRECTOR, BOWAN ARROW

Getting your marketing right is crucial if resellers want to find the best and fastest route to better margins and in his session marketing guru Andy Grant will stress that the new money is in being a service orientated business that really understands its customers and gives them the freedom and space to explain what they really want. He will also explain the importance of presenting a cohesive brand to customers and how Social Media should join up with everything you do.



ADAM ZOLDAN – DIRECTOR KINGHT CORPORATE FINANCE

In his presentation, Adam Zoldan, will present an overview of recent merger and acquisition activity, the themes that have driven these deals over the last 12 months and predictions for the coming year. The presentation will then look at the key factors that can have an impact on value, how you can build and focus your business to deliver success and what options are available to you for realising value.



PAUL CUNNINGHAM – COMMS DEALER

Opening the event, MiVaD facilitator Paul Cunningham will chart the course for the day's activities by outlining the changing ICT landscape and stressing the need for resellers to embrace change. He will ask delegates where they are now, where they want to get to and how they should map out their new routes to profit focusing on the dominance of mobile, the move to Web RTC, the pros and cons of Opex models and the threats to margins from Microsoft, Skype, WhatsApp etc.



RAMI HOUBBY – MANAGING DIRECTOR, NFON

In his keynote talk, Rami Houbby will discuss the benefits of moving customers over to Cloud telephony utilising his company's in-house developed standards-based software platform. He will outline how resellers can simply and easily sell Cloud telephony solutions into market sectors ranging from manufacturing, recruitment and insurance, to finance, local government, travel and retail. He will also explain how Skype for Business can integrate with NFON enterprise-grade telephony offering a one-stop shop for enterprises of all sizes.

Headsets for all reasons

Come what may in the comms industry, headsets will always be a central theme of the 21st century contact centre and other key markets, and Jonathan Davies, Agent Sales Manager, is urging all resellers to acknowledge this fact.

The reality is that once a contact centre or UC solution has been established it is conspicuously incomplete without the inclusion of appropriate headsets. We can build comprehensive solutions to keep organisations fully connected to their customers across all channels, but even the most sophisticated deployment will fail to fulfil its potential unless the roll out of optimised headsets becomes a matter of policy. Davies is enthusiastic about charting the positive impact of headsets and with a particular focus on the Agent brand he explains why headsets are essential and should be routinely sold into the major arenas. "No one can underestimate the role of headsets in the burgeoning UC and mobile markets," he stated.

One reason Agent headsets, a UK-based brand, have been successful is their growing popularity among a strong base of resellers, noted Davies, who is positioning Agent as a viable alternative that flexes with the demands of end users. "Once a reseller has established a foothold in a particular market,

selling headsets becomes a case of having the right approach and products when customers need them the most," he said. "Perhaps the best example of this is when Agent sales gathered momentum during the financial crisis, a time when cost was a primary consideration for all purchasing decision makers. With our products customers quickly found that they could acquire quality headsets cost-effectively."

Headset sales at present are driven by more than cost and quality of build. Functionality and the flexibility to adapt to all customer requirements have become prime considerations for technology buyers, and this year Agent is expanding its product range with an emphasis on the traditional merits of value and high quality but also enhanced by a sharper focus on providing an all encompassing alternative to rival brands in the market.

One newcomer to the Agent portfolio is the AU range of USB headsets. "These corded headsets for Unified Communications are a balance of robust design



Jonathan Davies

and competitive pricing which positions them for the UC call centre and VoIP office," explained Davies. "Agent is also refreshing its traditional corded headset offering with the addition of the premium AG range, incorporating an ultra noise-cancelling microphone, lightweight aluminium housing and a three year warranty as standard."

Cost-effective

For those resellers wanting a cost-effective solution for large deployments Agent has introduced a new 'workhorse' noise-cancelling headset called the AP series, pointed out Davies. Agent also sells the W880, a multi-use wireless headset for both traditional telephones and UC, while the corded headsets continue to support the swappable cables needed for both uses

as well as a 3.5mm jack for tablet and smartphone.

According to Davies the W880 illustrates how Agent is playing an important role in driving the widespread adoption of wireless headsets, showing organisations the efficiencies that can be derived from staff not being tied to their desks, and also exhibiting the benefits of hot desking. "This versatility in the Agent product range dovetails neatly with the growth of flexible working environments, where more people than ever before are buying headsets to use with many devices rather than just a fixed call centre desk or a desk phone in their office," added Davies.

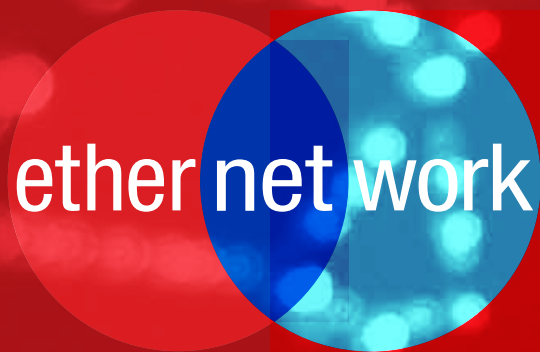
While healthy headset revenues do lie in mobile, contact centre and UC

environments, the market must also grow from the ambitions of a reseller base that is hungry for margin and displays an appetite to give customers what they want. "Agent offers resellers the chance to put the margin back into selling headsets," noted Davies. "But that hasn't been the only incentive to the expansion of Agent's market share. Resellers who get behind the brand soon find that customers do welcome an alternative solution. In a space where performance and value are key, and when the customer gets the headsets into their hands, Agent quickly becomes an attractive proposition."

Not surprisingly, the Agent brand continues to gain attention from proponents who value its properties of ease of sale combined with a dovetail-like relevance to all customer situations and requirements, claimed Davies, who also noted that customers are pleasantly surprised by their foresight to make an 'alternative' buying decision despite their tendency to stick with what they know.

"For those who want to grow revenues from headset sales there are huge spaces in the market lying fallow," commented Davies. "Some customers, for example, buy according to habit and do not consider alternatives due to perceived concerns about the complexity and cost of other options. But the reverse is always the case in our experience. When buying Agent these preconceptions are shattered. Customers are impressed by the contrast they see and feel they're purchasing something better for less money." ■

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Reshaping the industry

Two spheres of industry regulation have been spinning with unprecedented activity in recent weeks, but now it's time to turn our attention to the implications of Ofcom's Digital Communications Review and the Government's Investigatory Powers Bill, writes Eli Katz, Chair of ITSPA.

In their own ways, the publication of Ofcom's initial findings on its review of digital communications and the Investigatory Powers Bill are likely to shape the communications industry for the next decade. Ofcom's Strategic Review of Digital Communications, billed as the ten year sequel to 2005's Strategic Review of Telecommunications which resulted in the creation of Openreach, was preceded by a vast number of statements from key industry and political stakeholders on whether Openreach should be structurally separated from BT. Indeed, a cross-party group of 121 MPs led by former Tory Chairman Grant Shapps MP backed the 'Broadband' Report calling for structural separation.

Ofcom stopped short of recommending full structural separation of Openreach from BT, instead outlining measures to 'reform Openreach's governance' and strengthen its independence from BT so that it is 'governed at arm's length

from BT Group'. They stated that full separation would 'entail significant disruption and costs to both BT and the wider industry' if pursued.

Away from this headline news, Ofcom also announced measures that aim to increase investment in fibre, including giving competing providers access to Openreach's network of underground ducts and telegraph poles (to be implemented this summer), and measures to encourage a step-change in quality of service across the sector, including rigorous quality of service standards for Openreach, and the introduction of an annual Service Quality Report to publicly name and shame the best and worst performing fixed and mobile operators.

Ofcom also aims to 'secure wide availability of services' through supporting the Government's 10Mbit/S broadband Universal Service Obligation commitment, placing new coverage obligations on companies that win new spectrum licences and finally



Eli Katz

reforming the Electronic Communications Code. A further development of great significance for communications service providers (CSPs) is the announcement that all of Ofcom's General Conditions, which outline CSPs' legal obligations, are to be reviewed.

Hot topic

Furthermore, regarding the hot topic of the regulation of over-the-top (OTT) services, Ofcom has highlighted to the European Commission that it would be 'disproportionate' to automatically extend the scope of the Telecoms Framework (currently under review) to all OTT services by default, and are calling for flexibility to be retained. Less than a week after the

recommendations' had been reflected in the revised Bill text, claiming that strengthened safeguards, enhanced privacy protections and bolstered oversight arrangements had been introduced. The Government hopes for the Bill to become law by the end of the year due to the sunset clauses which apply to RIPA and DRIPA.

Despite these assurances, ITSPA, along with much of the industry, remains concerned by various aspects of the Bill, particularly the lack of clarity over Internet Connection Records (a record of the services that a device connects to) which will have to be retained by CSPs for a year, and the steps that the Government wants CSPs to follow regarding encryption.

Many tech companies are concerned that the Bill will require them to decrypt communications that have been encrypted by the end user, despite this being technically impossible (the Government has now stated that this will not be required), or include so-called 'back doors' which they fear would compromise the security of users' communications – a debate which is continuing on both sides of the Atlantic.

The key steps from the Ofcom Review will be implemented over a broad period of time, but further details on the proposals for bringing greater independence and autonomy to Openreach will be introduced later this year following discussions with the European Commission. ITSPA is holding a workshop for its members with Ofcom on the Review on April 7th. ■ www.itspa.org.uk



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An epitome of entrepreneur

The Pebbletree success story is born of entrepreneurial flair and the strength to instinctively flex with market demands, according to Managing Director Janni Thornton.

The first manifestation of Sunderland-based Pebbletree's strategic intent can be found in Thornton's original plan to create something different in the comms space, something that could not be ignored by cost conscious businesses. Any shift in tactics continues to be catalysed only by a desire to give customers what they need, and Pebbletree's *modus operandi* has become a 'personality' that shows the company at its agile best.

Before setting up Pebbletree as a family business Janni and her husband Robert previously worked for blue chip organisations in IT-based roles. They wanted to own their own company so decided to grab the bull by the horns and start up a software development business in 2005 providing bespoke solutions. A bright idea in early 2006 sparked the Soho66 brand into existence, which is now a high profile VoIP provider.

In 2007 the husband and wife team worked out of their spare bedroom. That summer, they shifted up a gear as orders poured in, enabling Soho66 to secure a market foothold against all the odds as the recession loomed. The catalyst was

the gulf that opened up for companies under siege from the worst financial crisis in living memory, that were picking up the pieces with ever-shrinking budgets. "Businesses wanted to cut costs anywhere possible to keep their head above water, and Soho66 offered an affordable, reliable telecoms solution that could help companies save in excess of 60-70 per cent on their comms compared to traditional providers," stated Thornton.

During 2007-2008, Soho66 generated revenue growth of almost 63 per cent and a year later 103 per cent. Unfazed by the biting recession Pebbletree spotted another growth opportunity, this time in Ireland. So Thornton established Goldfish.ie in partnership with a close friend and adapted the Soho66 cloud platform to suit the Irish market. Today, Goldfish boasts a customer base of more than 3,000 businesses supported by a team of seven located near Dublin. "Our ability to innovate and diversify without requiring the go-ahead from investors or a board has given Pebbletree the flexibility to build a successful core of brands," commented Thornton.



Janni Thornton

In 2013 Pebbletree launched another brand, Quvu (pronounced queue-view), a browser-based contact centre management system that enabled the firm to reach some of the largest users of telecoms. A year later the product received 'highly commended' recognition for Best VoIP Innovation at the ITSPA awards. Soho66 then snared the Best VoIP prize at the ISPA ceremony, and last year ITSPA awarded Soho66 the Best Business ITSP (medium enterprise) gong. "2015 was a year to remember for Pebbletree," added Thornton. "We were also crowned champions at the Echo Business Portfolio Awards after winning Employer of the Year."

Soho66 accounts for the majority of Pebbletree's 30,000-plus UK customer base. Although it primarily targets the SME market with cloud-based telecoms solutions, larger customers such as enterprises and contact centres are also switching to its services having opted to move their comms to the cloud.

The company now forecasts a 2014-2015 revenue increase of 21.5 per cent and expects this to grow to 31.5 per cent in the current financial year. Its team of 28 will also expand to more than 30 staff by 2017. "We have grown organically from day one, are debt-free, have no investors and have been

operating at a profit from the outset," added Thornton.

Crucially, Pebbletree's early growth was driven by a combination of vision and can-do leadership rather than a pre-planned long-term business plan. "In the beginning, strategy wasn't something that we proactively followed," added Thornton. "It may have been an unconventional business model but we knew the foundations we wanted to build the business on, and added strings to our bow when and where we could."

The strength of this approach is reflected in Soho66's success despite having no dedicated sales team. Furthermore, before Quvu's inception Pebbletree didn't have a sales department. "We grew thanks to word of mouth and recommendations from our customers," added Thornton. "As a self-built family business there has always been a strong focus on customer service. We continue to adapt, innovate and diversify as we see trends and shifts in the industry and marketplace, and believe that this approach, alongside our customer focus, has justified the steps we have taken and the decisions we have made. This approach is the reason why Soho66 is rated as the highest ranked VoIP provider of any of our competitors on TrustPilot, from over 400 customer reviews."

Just as popular is Soho66's Reseller and Affiliate programmes, pointed out Thornton, who noted that the company works with 110 white label partners and 288 affiliate resellers. "We see resellers as an important cog in our VoIP machine," she said. "They provide a

neurial talent

consistent, specialist, high level of service. If resellers maintain their customer ethos and provide the right solutions they will succeed in any market."

According to Thornton, Soho66 and Quvu are the primary growth areas as larger organisations realise the benefits of next generation communications. "The prospects for Quvu are huge," explained Thornton. "Some of the largest and most influential contact centres are switching their call management platforms onto the cloud and enjoying the cost savings. Internationally, Soho66 and Quvu have a chance to gain significant ground. With existing customers in the Irish, South African and Filipino markets we have the opportunity to build a strong global customer base. Although our services are used worldwide, we refuse to fall into a corporate way of working and believe investment in our platform, infrastructure and team is the best way of ensuring success."

Adaptability

Although Soho66 has built its customer base without a sales team, Thornton recognises the need to support the Quvu product with selling expertise. "With Quvu, the top priority is to continue to build the brand, develop the product, understand our customers' needs and adapt future releases to mirror them," noted Thornton. "By building all of our solutions in-house we can adapt and alter our priorities as the market changes. This gives us more freedom to innovate and the opportunity to work alongside customers."

Pebbletree has invested significantly to ensure that its platforms are as stable, resilient and reliable as possible by using a number of different data centres, each of them operating redundancy and failover fault tolerance. Pebbletree also carries out 24/7 platform monitoring across thousands of unique monitoring points allowing it to immediately detect a problem and rectify any issues. Aside from these investments, Pebbletree has created Simply66 as its own brand, a Virtual Receptionist service built and run in-house at the Pebbletree HQ. The company is also a fully fledged RIPE NCC member, giving it access to its own IP numbering.

The Pebbletree portfolio continues to evolve whenever the team spots a gap in the market, and the company's track record in such matters has earned it a reputation for entrepreneurial talent. "As with Simply66 and Quvu, we saw the chance to provide customers with a complementary product to Soho66, or in the case of Quvu, an evolution of the Soho66 solution," she added. "By tracking, understanding and dissecting the market and our competition we give ourselves the best chance of staying ahead of the game."

Thornton embraces Pebbletree's future with excitement and ambition and looks back on a decade well lived. "In a career with many highlights, celebrating 10 years of Pebbletree has been my biggest achievement," she said. "It is a special milestone for Robert and I, and it is testament to the risks we have taken and the decisions we have made since we started the business." ■

Just a minute with Janni Thornton...

Tell us something about yourself we don't know:

I hip hop danced as a teenager back in Denmark, and entered regional and national competitions

What talent do you wish you had? To be a professional dancer

Role model: Ole Kirk Christiansen, the founder of Lego. He built a global family business from nothing into the world's most popular toy

What do you fear the most? Donald Trump becoming the US President

One example of something you have overcome? Fear of spiders

What possession could you not live without: My passport

Your greatest strength and what could you improve on? One of my greatest strengths is my ability to listen to people and be someone to confide in. My 'love' for shoes is a weakness!

Name one thing you couldn't do without in your job: The cloud

If you weren't in comms what would you be doing? I would love to be part of Médecins Sans Frontières. They do incredible work

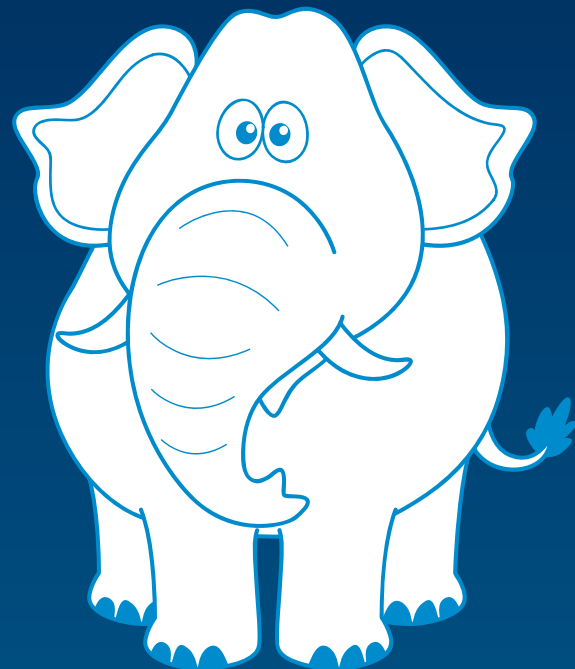
If you could transform any area of the telecoms/IT industry what would it be? Break up the monopoly and allow fairer competition

How do you relax when not working? Travelling and exploring new cultures and cities is therapeutic and interesting

How would you like to be remembered? Not by name, but for making a difference



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Building on core values

Pride and purple blood flows through Nine Group's corporate veins, and the core values at the heart of the company are reflected in its state-of-the-art offices, now one year old. Here, Group Marketing Director Mark Saunders discusses how Nine's new building, called The Hub, supports the structure and culture of the organisation, its leadership and staff.

It has long been acknowledged that any organisation depends on the loyalty and well being of its people, and Nine Group's move to The Hub one year ago is a worthy example of how a growing company can advance this cause by taking residence in a new purpose built premises. What Nine's office relocation exposes most clearly is the close relationship between company purpose, culture, branding and staff motivation. Furthermore, moving a business is an exciting and progressive event, no matter how short the distance. "We only travelled across the car park last March when we relocated to our brand new HQ building," said Saunders. "But the benefits have been immense."

Office relocations can occur for a number of reasons. In Nine's case the prime motive was expansion, and the move was a cause for celebration. "The biggest change for our staff is the extra space

and air conditioning," added Saunders. "No more squabbling over the portable units in our old home. New chairs and desks, leading edge IT, more loos, a big car park and free lunches – what more could anyone ask for in a workplace?"

Nine's office move presented an opportunity to update the decor and aesthetics in line with the company's culture and brand messaging. "Everyone at Nine is proud to work at The Hub, which has colourful wall art, glass fronted offices with quirky titles, and relaxation facilities including our purple baized pool table," stated Saunders. "A new building is all very well, but The Hub is also the physical representation of our brand and our business values. We are welcoming, bright and a little bit different from the rest."

Nine is living proof that office design should not be without practical application in how a company wants to be portrayed. Creating



Mark Saunders

There is a link between providing a great place to work and business success

quirky working spaces and neat employee use-areas shows that Nine has put its own name and style on The Hub. The style and tone has also been created to leave a lasting impression on visitors including channel partners, opening up new perceptions of the business.

Positive impact

"We can be much more enthusiastic about welcoming resellers and suppliers to our new home, as well as being able to host events," added Saunders. "The impact on our resellers has been positive. Happy staff generally provide outstanding service

and that holds true for Nine Wholesale in our reseller surveys. It is always good to receive positive feedback and I am convinced that there is a link between providing a great place to work and increasing business success."

Moving offices has enabled Nine to initiate a new corporate fit-out that is a long way from working environments once occupied by staff in previous roles, such as Nine Wholesale's Operations Manager Mark Johnson who traced his Nine heritage back to the early days of Club Communications. "The

original Club building was based in an old pub in Nailsworth," he explained. "Then we moved to Chestnut House, a crumbling but once-grand Georgian town house that had been vacated by a Health Spa business. We inherited a swimming pool and occasionally conducted meetings on massage couches. Following our acquisition by Nine seven years ago we moved to Pegasus House. But rapid business growth created the pressing conditions that prompted our relocation to The Hub, which is the smartest office we have ever worked in."

Moving office has also enabled Nine to exploit the opportunities for creative growth, most notably in Saunders' own territory, the marketing area of The Hub, which is jokingly referred to as the 'colouring in department'. "There is a lot of purple in my office, which also has a small talking Dalek, Warhol inspired artwork, many mood boards and lots of Lego to aid creativity," he added. "When industry magazine Marketing Week recently used the same theme for their front cover we sent a photo and a request to feature in any future best marketing offices competition, which they have redistributed over social media."

Nine Group has shown us that the benefits of moving premises can be easy to measure if a workplace that 'moves' people is created effectively. "This year Nine achieved the Gold Standard for Investors in People," added Saunders. "Our new office helped us to build on the Silver Standard we achieved a few years ago." ■

It's time to partner for profit

As more and more businesses look towards running their entire communications on IP networks in advance of the demise of ISDN, the demand for software based PBXs is expected to rise exponentially.

The cloud PBX and UC market is poised to reach \$12 billion by 2018 and software solutions are increasingly seen as the most affordable telephony bedrock for small and medium businesses.

Clearly, in order to react to this growing demand, smart thinking ICT resellers should think about adding software based PBX solutions to their portfolio as soon as possible and global UC powerhouse 3CX aims to ease that process with the launch of its upgraded partner programme.

3CX is the developer of 3CX Phone System, a software-based PBX which replaces proprietary phone systems and delivers a complete Unified Communications solution via its open standard software based IP PBX that can be integrated with other applications.

Founder Nick Galea believes it's about bringing all methods of communication into one user-friendly interface and "making those methods of communication as seamless, enjoyable and productive for all involved, whether that be for the organisation that invested in the system, or a partner or client that simply has a computer and internet connection to work with".

In line with this simplicity of thought, the company now wants to make developing a partnership with 3CX as easy, rewarding and profitable as possible.

"The restructuring of our partner programme includes new partner levels as well as a new points system and is set to make it more straightforward and incentivising for 3CX Partners," said Galea

"The 3CX team is made up of hand-picked individuals who realise the importance of our resellers and the constant demand to innovate within the industry. We are a

100% channel company and we nurture a culture of being easy to do business with.

"We support our partners by offering free training, free technical support and easy pricing and purchasing procedures. This helps resellers deploy 3CX more easily and more profitably. Our revised partner programme is completely free of charge and is not only profitable for partners but also provides them with all the tools required to be able to sell 3CX."

These tools include:

- NFR licenses
- Support
- Marketing and Sales material
- Listing on the 3CX website
- Performance-based margin
- Access to leads

3CX says that unlike other vendors, it offers its partners regular training events for free in the form of webinars and onsite training. In addition, 3CX Partners are entitled to participate in the free certification programme which is designed to boost 3CX Partners' profitability by giving them the resources and knowledge they need to deploy and support 3CX products.

3CX Sales Manager Marcus Kogel commented: "We are a 100% channel company and our partner programme has been recognised as an elite process for resellers looking to increase their revenue. With the revised programme we are raising the bar for the channel and renewing our commitment towards our loyal partners. 3CX has always been about the channel, from our products to our sales processes. Consequently, loyalty towards 3CX rewards partners with important benefits and more profitability."

New 3CX Partner Levels

The new programme adds partner levels in order to better categorise its rapidly growing



"We support our partners by offering free training, free technical support and easy pricing and purchasing procedures."

Nick Galea



"We are a 100% channel company and our partner programme has been recognised as an elite process for resellers looking to increase their revenue."

Marcus Kogel

partner base. With its new partner model 3CX aims at rewarding partners who are actively engaged with the company. The new partner levels and their benefits are:

- **3CX Affiliate:**
4 Simultaneous Call NFR licenses
- **3CX Silver Partner:**
8 Simultaneous Calls NFR licenses, 3CX Website listing and access to leads.
- **3CX Gold Partner:**
Priority listing on the high traffic 3CX website.
- **3CX Platinum Partner:**
16 Simultaneous Calls NFR licenses. 3CX's top management responds to Platinum Partners' product feedback.

New Points System

The new points system aims at rewarding partners who are certified and trained by 3CX and who also show loyalty to the company with repeated sales. It doesn't only reflect sales volume, but also the effort and commitment a 3CX Partner shows towards 3CX.

"The new programme is easy to understand as it gives clear requirements for all partner levels. With the restructuring of the programme not only the number of sales are reflected in the points system but also the number of projects, making it much more achievable to reach the Silver and Gold Partner levels by allowing partners with smaller projects to attain a higher ranking," continued Kogel.

"To qualify for the 3CX partner programme you need to be a company that resells computer hardware, software or services and sell a minimum of one license per six months. As an active 3CX Partner you will be entitled to a free NFR license, Free Certification and Partner Training events which are held worldwide."

To apply visit <http://www.3cx.com/partners/apply/> and complete the form. 3CX promises to review your application within two business days.

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PAUL TAYLOR
VOICEFLEX

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CHARLES AYLWIN
8X8

"The Comms Dealer Sales Awards are a great opportunity for the industry to recognise fantastic work across the year. The awards acknowledge the best in our industry and how the Channel has continued to grow and adapt to the changing business environment. We look forward to celebrating another brilliant year with the best people in the channel."



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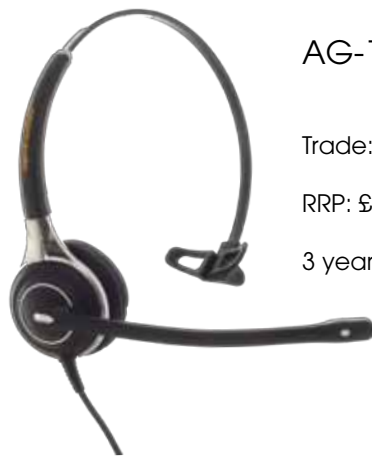


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Technology converges on

The channel's role in contact centres is not just to indulge end users in all their technology preferences by removing every obstacle to seamless multichannel customer engagement, but to greatly enhance these requirements with insightful analytics and systems integration. Only then can the high 'techspectrum' of customers be fully met.

Seamless and insightful customer service is becoming ever more popular as organisations seek to engage with consumers more holistically. These trends are transforming the traditional call centre model as the lines between different communications technologies continue to blur. For example, contact centre and unified communications technologies will increasingly be packaged together as multi-channel services grow in popularity. Content Guru has responded appropriately to these market requirements and its platform, called storm, combines multi-channel contact centre with unified communications, machine-to-machine and Communications Integration in a single environment.

Content Guru has expanded considerably over the last two years on the back of burgeoning contact centre sales. Millions of interactions are handled every day via storm for global brands including National Rail Enquiries, Chubb and Sodexo. The company has established new cloud operations in Germany and America, relocated its UK headquarters to larger premises three times the size, and nearly doubled its workforce. Today, approximately 50 per cent of Content Guru's

revenues are delivered via its channel partners, which include Vodafone and KPN in Europe, and a number of international partners to address new markets.

"Consumers have increasingly high techspectrum," said Martin Taylor, Director and co-founder of Content Guru. "They expect to be able to contact supplier organisations whenever they need to, using the device and channel of their choice. Voice, while hugely important, is now part of a wider mix of communication channels. Increasingly, the notion of the traditional call or contact centre is being outdated as the broader concept of customer engagement gains momentum. Companies must embrace email, SMS, web chat and a lot more besides. They must also deliver service quickly, accurately and in a personalised manner."

Key to the delivery of personalised customer engagement solutions is integrating customer-facing technology with back-end systems and resources, enabling contact centre agents to harness information that enables them to deliver a high value service. Integration can also be used to personalise self-service on a mass scale, create 'in-app' service capabilities and deliver advanced computer telephony (and more).



Martin Taylor

"Resellers need to understand the subtleties of contact centre requirements across different industries."

"While integration, speech analytics, WebRTC, workforce optimisation and other contact centre technologies point towards a bright future, businesses do not have unlimited resources to dedicate to their customer contact operations," noted Taylor. "Both public and private sector organisations are under pressure to reduce costs, improve productivity and comply with industry regulations. This too creates significant opportunities in the contact centre market, using integration to ensure that these organisations

can make the most of their existing systems without having to rip-and-replace."

Functionality

Not surprisingly, Content Guru's priority is to develop the functionality of its platform. This often means looking at nascent market trends and maintaining a roadmap that anticipates future demand, and then developing the functionality to be ready for deployment when client requirements for the service become mainstream. "That not only means keeping up

with changing industry regulations around recording and online payments, but also developing the platform to bring on new technologies such as WebRTC and speech analytics, and new capabilities such as workforce optimisation and multi-channel propensity modelling," explained Taylor.

"Resellers need to understand the subtleties of contact centre requirements across different industries. The needs of a utilities contact centre, for example, will differ from a public sector contact centre. Personalisation is key to how contact centres engage with their customers, but it is also key to how resellers can successfully sell contact centre capabilities to their clients."

Cloud communications has grown rapidly during the last couple of years and 8x8 has witnessed a sharpening appetite for this technology from larger enterprises. According to David Rowlands, 8x8's EMEA Head of Virtual Contact Centres, an important factor in meeting this demand is having a solution that fits businesses of every size and is ready to go straight out of the box. "More and more businesses are turning to the cloud for their contact centre needs," he commented. "This means agents are not

contact centres

only able to work flexibly and remotely, they can also work more productively.

"Contact centres and businesses want more knowledge of their customers to improve service. We now offer Customer Journey Analytics that looks at contact centre performance from the customer's perspective, providing valuable insights to improve customer service. Contact centre managers can drill into specific call experiences to identify and correct customer interaction problems and address issues before they become widespread."

There is enough information available for technology to analyse and empower organisations, helping them to resolve customer issues far more effectively than human expertise alone. Tollring delivers contact centre analytics alongside business call analytics to provide a holistic view of the business environment. Over the last few years Tollring has been working with technology partners such as Mitel, BroadSoft, Ericsson-LG and Samsung to deliver a richer contact centre solution. These companies are embedding Tollring's analytics into their systems to enhance the user's experience by offering greater business intelligence.

"Our analytics are integrated with our partners' contact centre technologies alongside enterprise-wide call monitoring and other technologies such as CRM systems," explained Simon Whatley, Sales Director. "Our dashboard displays analytics that show all the customer touchpoints across an organisation including the contact centre, multisite calls,

emails, website enquiries and social media. Our partners are looking to deliver solutions to larger companies and multi-site organisations. These are often complex enterprises with numerous customer touch points beyond the contact centre. Understanding how a business is servicing a customer is complex and organisations want to understand the customer journey across the whole enterprise rather than just what's happening within a specific contact centre."

Deep insights

Many of Tollring's clients have existing contact centre solutions that no longer deliver a return on investment in terms of customer service. "However, with cloud-based analytics existing technologies can be adapted so customers can gain a better understanding of what is happening across their contact centre and their overall business," added Whatley. "Rather than undertake complete technology transformations we look to enhance existing technologies and take the customer on a journey of transformation."

When selling these solutions it is important for resellers to show customers the return on an investment. This means talking about the business value and the outcomes rather than the physical technology. "For example, we often highlight the metric for unreturned missed calls and convert this into a figure that represents a cost for each missed sale," commented Whatley. "Looking at business and financial outcomes rather than the physical outcomes is very powerful. Caller

tolerance in specific markets is another interesting metric when comparing how long a customer is prepared to wait for their call to be answered. A minute's wait for a high street retailer may be far too long and result in lost business."

ShoreTel's launch of ShoreTel Connect and its acquisition of Corvisa in January have produced two distinct propositions for contact centre customers – an out-of-the-box (Connect Contact Centre) solution and a fully customisable offering (ShoreTel Flex).

"The market is looking for more flexibility and choice in UC and contact centres," commented Adrian Hipkiss, Vice President and Managing Director EMEA, ShoreTel. "To meet this demand we offer open, standards-based APIs and SDKs which accelerates third party application integration within the ShoreTel ecosystem."

End user businesses and partners are looking for a contact centre solution that provides flexibility and promotes the best customer experience. Some customers want this straightaway as a feature, others prefer to build their own customised solution. "In any case, a contact centre solution that easily integrates third party applications to fit preferred business processes is now a minimum, coupled with an easy-to-use interface," added Hipkiss. "With a market in transition, it's possible that contact centre resellers will fall into two major groups – those that want to deploy and manage an out-of-the-box solution and those that may also want to develop professional services in the contact centre space." ■

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Cybercrime and navigation

No one would argue against network security being one of today's top priorities, but despite greater awareness of the risks, end user attitudes towards data protection and their strategies to combat cybercrime are not so clear cut. What is plain to see, however, is the market opportunity for resellers who can meet these must-have requirements.

With only 45 per cent of businesses worldwide confident in their security capabilities (according to Cisco's Annual Security Report), and cyber attackers launching more sophisticated, bold and resilient campaigns, it is more crucial than ever for security to be pushed to the forefront of business priorities. "The exponential growth in the number of devices and cloud applications accessing the ever extending network, sprawling perimeters and assets across many access points, has meant the attack surface is expanding, leaving it vulnerable to exploitation from cyber criminals," said Terry Greer-King, Director of Cyber Security, Cisco UK&I.

"Complete visibility and control over the network is the only way to protect it, yet 90 per cent of organisations are not fully aware of the devices accessing their networks, with 5-10 more cloud applications in use than IT departments realise. Therefore it is essential businesses have a system in place to withstand the rising number of cyber threats, not just during an attack, but before and after."

With this in mind, companies must employ a holistic approach to security, says

Greer-King, ensuring that the priorities of the privacy and security teams align with the organisation's operations. "This, coupled with a detailed data landscape will make sure businesses have a true understanding of the data flowing through the network and maintain 360 degrees of protection across multiple access point, departments and locations," he stated.

Security must also be embedded into the heart of the intelligent network infrastructure, as well as across the extended network that is increasingly powered by the cloud. "By enabling companies to better monitor what could be a potential hole in their security system, a new found confidence can boost productivity and drive a business transformation," added Greer-King. "This will empower partners and leaders to transform their business processes and deliver value with greater speed, efficiency, and agility."

With security often making up a mere ten per cent of a company's overall IT budget, there is a big gap between cybercrime awareness and security spending. Resellers can help close this gap by making end users aware of their options. "To do this, they need to be familiar with the latest technologies and threats, and there are



Terry Greer-King

"The attack surface is expanding, leaving it vulnerable to exploitation by cyber criminals. Complete visibility and control over the network is the only way to protect it."

various resources to help with that," explained Graham Jones, Country Manager, Exclusive Networks UK. "At the very least, resellers should work with a distributor that can help them to acquire this information."

High cost of breaches

The majority of UK businesses expect more security breaches this year and the cost of these breaches will continue to soar, outstripping the available budget to combat and contain cybercrime.

Jones also noted that resellers need to become a trusted advisor to their customers, identifying security flaws and offering a platform solution as opposed to separate products, along with a clear strategy on how they can improve their entire ecosystem. "Resellers need to ask themselves which products they can integrate as one platform, and which can improve the ability to detect, protect and respond when it comes to security breaches," added Jones.

"It's about investing in products that work well together rather than focusing on individual point products. Everyone knows there's a skills shortage in IT security, so if you can have one expert managing ten products that work well together, it's much more valuable than having ten experts managing ten separate products working in silo."

The biggest threat to the end user is always going to be the insider, whether that means being compromised by an attacker or making a genuine mistake like opening a malicious email or leaving their laptop or other device unlocked somewhere. "The insider will always be the targeted route into an organisation," added Jones. "We've seen an increase in demand for mobility

ing the threat landscape

focused products, especially those that can protect organisations from the threats opened up by new styles of working, such as using enterprise cloud apps."

In his approach to security Jones first considers the three factors of protect, detect and mediate, and then matches vendors against those areas to see where best they work. "We then get vendors to work together," noted Jones. "It's vital that these different technologies can talk to each other effortlessly to improve the speed end users can respond to breaches. Our solutions and the platforms we're building are tightly linked to the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) so end users know exactly where they stand against those standards and what Exclusive can offer them from our portfolio."

The two big growth markets for IT security resellers are linked to GDPR regulation, believes Jones. "The other growth area is cloud adoption," he added. "By 2020, 80 per cent of organisations will need a cloud application security protocol, so the market is set to explode over the next few years."

A growing number of high profile cyber attacks means that security should now be on the agenda of every company board meeting. While security awareness and spend continues to grow within most organisations the percentage of overall budget aligned to security cannot grow indefinitely, so companies have risk versus reward calculations to make, pointed out David Ellis, Head of Technology and Services EMEA, Arrow ECS.



David Ellis

"Few markets have the same must-have requirements, and every customer brings a new conversation and possible new security needs."

"The market has adapted to the need for 'more from less', with vendors adding security functionality to their core products and in turn reducing the number of point products to be purchased and maintained," he said.

Innovation

The opportunity for resellers and other channel organisations is to innovate within their customer base. "Regular reviews of companies' security systems are essential and it's the resellers carrying out these checks that are seeing disproportionate growth," noted Ellis. "For example, end users that renew subscriptions and services on older products, although a straightforward transaction, will typically experience higher support costs.

"In many cases, the end user won't be aware that it's possible to refresh older products with new ones that have better performance, greater functionality and carry lower support costs. And by doing so, businesses can achieve the goal of

increasing security without increasing spend. Over a three-year period, the total cost of ownership is the same or less than maintaining an old product."

From a technology standpoint, the strength of supply continues to be the firewall appliance with threat prevention functionality, observed Ellis. "Channel trends also indicate further functionality being taken up in greater numbers, such as protection from Zero Day or unknown attacks via sandboxing," he added. "And there's an increase in the use of larger appliances running virtual licenses for network segmentation over multiple smaller single firewall appliances. Few markets have the same must-have requirements, and every customer brings a new conversation and possible new security needs."

Many resellers claim to protect businesses from threats such as DDoS attacks, when in fact they are not trained to provide the right security advice, according

to Richard Brown, Director of EMEA Channels and Alliances at Arbor Networks. "Instead, by only buying a firewall or advanced threat protection solution as a bolt-on, many customers think they are benefitting from expert advice when they are in fact still exposed," he added. "Some resellers are not getting the right training to sell the correct security protection and need to gain a better understanding of the real threats facing businesses today."

There is a significant opportunity for resellers in the network security market, and one area of particular interest is threat intelligence. According to Arbor Networks' latest Worldwide Infrastructure Security Report, 44 per cent of businesses have already integrated threat intelligence within their incident response function. "Threat intelligence data can be invaluable to end user organisations low on resources," added Brown. "They need to maximise the effectiveness of their



Adam Nash

"The industry should be providing security-as-a-service and adopting the role of CISO or CTO for SMBs."

own security teams by using the broader visibility and specialist skill sets of their vendors and partners."

The biggest security myth is that 'the cloud security debate is simple', according to Adam Nash, EMEA Sales Manager at Webroot. Both cloud and on-premise solutions should be merged to give the best protection, he pointed out. "Resellers need to take into account the size and nature of the business, the type of data and systems they want to protect and also the type of solution they are implementing," said Nash. "Resellers also need to understand the expertise of the in-house staff, the risk appetite of the business and allocated budgets, just to name a few of the key considerations. Outsourced, cloud-based security solutions give SMBs a viable and cost-effective alternative to going-it-alone and are essential when trying to deal with the rising tide of zero day malware."

Cybercrime became big business in the noughties. Online fraud has surpassed traditional fraud and both the home user and businesses are targets. "As IT security gets more complex the industry should be providing security-as-a-service and adopting the role of CISO or CTO for SMBs," added Nash. "Good security policies for IT staff and end users, solid back-up security solutions and the patching of systems are important. User error and badly patched or secured systems are still the main ways for a company to be exploited. All of this adds up to a big opportunity for resellers, but removing complexity is key." ■



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“ Employing young people and apprentices has been core to our recruitment plan for a number of years and we have benefitted from their willingness to learn, share and develop with us. The energy they bring is also infectious and we need that to continue the trend of enthusiasm for our changing industry and market place. The industry as a whole should understand the responsibility we have as a community to invest in young minds and their future. We need to connect with, grow and develop them to bring the real technology challenges and opportunities, as they see them, to the fore. These young minds serve the future success of all our businesses, so it is vital we embrace them as early as possible. ”



CLIFFORD NORTON
CHANNEL TELECOM

“ A difficult topic. It is currently unlikely we will be employing apprentices any time soon, as we need staff with experience however I am always happy to train new people, and maybe Channel Telecom should look at this, but I have no idea where to start. I think apprentices are a fantastic idea and in many industries they really do work. I am a firm believer in experience and learning on the job can be equally if not more beneficial than spending time in a class room particularly for young people. Employment teaches them responsibility and social skills different to those developed at school, college or university. We don't currently consider apprenticeships but perhaps moving forward we just might. ”



The Institute of Telecoms Professionals (ITP) recently conducted some research across the industry to evaluate the benefits that apprentices bring. 100% of those who responded saw apprenticeships as a cost-effective way of bringing fresh talent into the sector.



JOHN PETT
CHESS

“ Over the past four years we have taken on 15 apprentices in IT Support, Development, Finance and Marketing. Whilst Chess have invested plenty of time and resource into our apprentices, we have also benefitted greatly from bringing in such enthusiastic and committed young people keen to develop their careers with us. The vast majority of our apprentices have remained with us upon completing their apprenticeships and are now engaged in further education to enhance their knowledge and value to the business. This year we plan to recruit even more apprentices, particularly into areas such as Development and Technology where many employers are experiencing skill shortages. We will also be taking on 40 apprentices through a partnership with the Prince's Trust. ”



PAM WILLIAMS
GAMMA

“ At Gamma we provide opportunities for young people, whether as apprentices, student placements, interns or work experience. Our commitment to developing apprentices led us to organising an annual Outward Bound Training Programme to develop their teambuilding and leadership skills. We also assign mentors to apprentices to help them become accustomed to working life and develop their skills: a rewarding experience for all parties. We invest in apprentices as they are keen to learn, engaged and motivated, provide great employees for the future and make genuine contribution to the business from day one. Gamma is always looking for new opportunities to attract young people and have started working with organisations to further our commitment, especially with those from disadvantaged backgrounds. ”

Almost 90% felt it was a great way to ensure a constant flow of suitably trained staff, and the same figure felt it was an opportunity to 'give something back'. The same research also revealed high retention rates, helping keep down costly and inconvenient staff turnover.



PAUL BARNETT
ICUK

“ ICUK has, and will continue to, employ young people, but less so an apprentice. Finding individuals who are willing and want to learn is hard, and no matter what the incentive is from the government, it's the individual that matters. I would sooner see state money being poured into schools so that they leave fit for work, and not making work an extension of school. This is especially prevalent when it comes to coding because schools have limited coverage of this within the current curriculum, yet there is evidence to suggest that where it is taught (mainly in after school clubs) that the benefits it brings to other topics such as maths, as well as thought processes and behaviour, is significant. ”



HENRY WEST
KCOM

“ Developing new talent to meet our customers' needs is as important as investing in our capability roadmap. In recent years we've employed over 20 people who joined us on apprenticeships in IT and telecommunications. In fact, one of our software engineering apprentices won the Microsoft Apprentice of the Year Award in 2014. As well as being a more cost-effective approach than recruiting skilled employees, the concept of growing our own gives us much more freedom to recruit for attitude and aptitude. With a structured training and skills development programme while they're on the job, we find the process produces employees with accredited skills and an understanding of how our business works. ”

Nationally, this level of satisfaction is reflected in apprenticeships across all industries, with employers saying they reduce staff turnover, prevent skill shortages, and bring fresh talent into the UK economy.

622,000 young people aged 16-24 were unemployed in October-December 2015. This represents an enormous pool of talent for companies to build and develop their future workforces and as Crissi Williams, Senior Commercial Manager from the ITP suggests, taking on an apprentice can provide much needed impetus to a business.

not Totally surprising

ve to be given a chance



PHIL GEE
NIMANS

“ Investing in the future is a key component of any successful business. Investors in People Gold status reflects how Nimans recognises and values the inherent role our staff play in the continued development of the company. We have a good age profile with more experienced staff offering advice and knowledge to newer members of the workforce, harnessing their enthusiasm and desire to succeed. We have a dedicated training department working continuously to develop talent throughout the company and a newly introduced Personal Development Review programme identifies training needs and gives everyone defined career paths with the opportunity to influence their own roles. After all, people are our biggest asset.”



DARREN HILTON
TIMICO PARTNERS

“ As a business we are keen to invest in young talent and have taken on a number of apprentices in both our local partners office in Fareham as well as our HQ in Nottingham. We have a variety of sources that we look to when employing these guys, including our local Technical College for our technical helpdesk staff and a local apprentice training company for other areas, including customer service. The apprentices have a hunger for knowledge and bring a high level of enthusiasm and motivation to our business, which in turn influences the rest of the teams. We haven't seen any direct support from the Government, but the colleges and training companies are well structured and provide the appropriate assistance.”

“Hiring an apprentice is a long-term investment, and many organisations we work with see it as an ideal opportunity to create a workforce trained from scratch” she said. “We have been running the only apprenticeship scheme of its kind for the telecoms industry since 2013, and as a result have created more than 50 jobs in 20 different organisations. These range from engineers to technical helpdesk advisors, not only offering young people a chance to start their careers, but also providing telecoms businesses with a headache free way of finding the fresh talent they need. We recruit, train and mentor apprentices on behalf of our clients.”



VINCENT DISNEUR
UNION STREET

“ Union Street first began recruiting apprentices in 2012. By investing time into training and mentoring, we've been able to harness and cultivate the raw talents of some highly capable individuals. The continued development of their skills delivers countless benefits, both to ourselves, and our reseller partners. Apprenticeship schemes can be very cost effective. There's no recruitment costs and grants are paid to the employer by the Government for each apprentice it appoints (up to a maximum of ten apprentices). Union Street worked with a great third party training provider, Hawk Training, who helped us to recruit suitable apprentices and also provided them with government funded workplace training.”



DAVID JONES
DAISY GROUP

“ Daisy has a track record of working with young people through apprenticeship programmes, and this forms an essential part of our emerging talent initiative. Especially within our industry, it is important that we have staff that can bring fresh and exciting ideas to the table. This year we will be seeking to expand our apprenticeships programme in the local communities around our main sites. Partnering with local education bodies to deliver a comprehensive development programme, enabling generations X and Y to develop a career across a wide range of disciplines within the Daisy Group.”

“This month a new group of apprentices will start the level 3 training and begin their industry journey. The next cohort will start in September so we would urge telecoms businesses to get in touch if they are interested in working together.”



CHRISSI WILLIAMS
ITP

“ As the leading apprentice training organisation in the telecoms industry we are clearly keen to keep companies informed of employment changes and the Apprenticeship Levy announcement by Chancellor George Osborne in the Government's Autumn Statement, is highly significant. In a nutshell, the Levy aims to increase the number of apprenticeships to meet the Conservative manifesto. It is expected to raise £3bn annually over the next five years and help create three million more apprenticeships. It will require all companies with salary bills of over £3 million to partake through PAYE with the first payment (0.5%) being made in April 2017. To assist businesses with the Levy, ITP is launching an apprenticeship consultancy service designed to offer guidance, advice and support.”



MARK WHITEHEAD
GCI

“ Young talent is mostly packaged with the attributes every employer looks for - enquiring minds, energy and an appetite to learn. But let's be clear, there's also something catalytic that the younger generation contributes via a fearless hunger for new technology and simplification; it's back to the millennial effect and better ways of working and new ways of communicating. These youngsters (with the right coaching and attitude) will mature from learners, to influencers, to decision makers and the benefit we get is a well-rounded asset 'primed' individual able to help shape our future. Are we getting the support we need from industry bodies? Yes - and long may it continue.”

Based on the response to this subject it would seem that many channel companies have enthusiastically tapped into the apprentice resource. Others are simply unwilling or unequipped to explore the opportunity, which is a great pity.

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Bigger role for Clark



Paul Clark

PAUL Clark has stepped in as VP and MD of Plantronics' Europe and Africa business, taking over from Philip Vanhoutte who exits this month following a 12 year stint with the firm. Clark previously led the Northern and Eastern Europe, Russia and Sub-Saharan Africa regions.

"Paul has deep knowledge of our business, customers and partners and his strengths in global collaboration position him well to help take our company to the next level," said Ken Kannappan, President and CEO, Plantronics.

Clark added: "With the inexorable rise of professional and personal communications, where we are increasingly finding ourselves time-poor, it is exciting to lead a business committed to helping people improve their connected lives."

Clark joined Plantronics in 1994 and became EMEA Marketing Director, spearheading the launch of an international reseller programme and Plantronics' consumer

business. Clark was also instrumental in launching the Plantronics Connect Partner Programme in the Russian and Eastern European markets. He has held a number of executive positions in sales, product management and marketing across the consumer, SMB and enterprise segments. Clark holds a first class honours degree in Electronic Engineering and a business administration degree from Durham University. He also studied strategic marketing management at Harvard Business School.

Genius CEO brings in G3

GENIUS Networks Managing Director James Arnold-Roberts has become CEO and moved G3 Comms under his wing. He will orchestrate the operations of both business units with G3 and Genius continuing to operate in



James Arnold-Roberts

the indirect and direct sales channels respectively with separate management teams. "While G3 and Genius follow different routes to market with their own dedicated services, both share the same driving force – the expansion of businesses into overseas markets and the need for global communications," commented Arnold-Roberts.

"This strategy is common to both operations and it's my priority to ensure we can give our multi-national customers the resources and solutions they need, irrespective of whether they are end users or service providers."

Also on the move...



Gordon Mackintosh

EXTREME Networks has appointed Gordon Mackintosh as Senior Director of Worldwide Partner Programme and Sales Business Development. His remit is to run the Extreme Partner Network (EPN) and drive new sales

and partner initiatives. Prior to his appointment Mackintosh held various leadership roles in sales and channel at Cisco where he was responsible for go-to-market strategies and was the Head of Distribution and SMB in the UK. Bob Gault, Executive VP of Worldwide Sales, Services and Channels, said: "It's perfect timing for Gordon to join our team following the recent enhancements to the EPN."

ANDREW Bevan will oversee the design and implementation of new customer solutions and services at Onyx Group following his appointment as Director of Client Solutions. He said: "I am



Andrew Bevan

looking forward to applying both my industry and technical experience to help deliver the aggressive growth plans the company has in place. I can't wait to get started." Onyx Group CEO Neil Stephenson added:

"In Andrew, we have appointed someone with the technical capabilities and business acumen to exceed our customers' expectations. It is testimony to the progress being made at Onyx that we can recruit people with Andrew's pedigree."



Maryam Arbabi

IMAGO ScanSource's policy of nurturing home grown talent has again come to fruition with the appointment of Maryam Arbabi as Head of Products and Marketing UK and Nick Waldeck as Head of Southern UK Sales.

Arbabi joined the company over seven years ago as an Internal Account Manager on the sales team and worked her way up to Sales Manager for the south west region. Part of her remit was to implement marketing and sales promotion programmes for vendors and to run business growth campaigns in association with resellers.

Waldeck came to Imago ScanSource in 2005 working in the marketing department and has since held a number of roles including product management with responsibility for developing key manufacturers. He later moved into a sales role and was named Top Sales Person of The Year before becoming Sales Manager for the south east area.

James Vickerage, VP for UK&I, said: "Maryam and Nick are two of the company's rising stars. Our strategy is to develop our best talent and to promote from within wherever possible."

Hooper to head up distribution

FUJITSU has appointed Andy Hooper as Distribution Sales Manager UK&I. He brings 20 years IT experience including a stint at Hammer where he was nominated for the Storage Awards Channel



Andy Hooper

Excellence award three times, winning in 2011. As Business Development Manager he grew Hammer's external storage business by 1,400 per cent in two years. He went on to become Sales Manager and later General Manager of UK Sales.

Kevin Matthews, Head of Channel and Direct Services at Fujitsu UK&I, commented: "Andy brings a proven track record in growing vendor franchises within the distribution segment. His first task will be to shape our distribution strategy as we move into our new financial year."

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