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THE HEARTBEAT OF THE UK COMMS INDUSTRY

Maintel scales up with Azzurri deal

AIM-listed Maintel's acquisition of Azzurri Communications, almost double its size, is set be 'truly transformative' providing integration issues are overcome.

SPECIAL REPORT

The acquisition of Azzurri by Maintel for £48.5m gives the enlarged organisation greater scope in the cloud and UC space and strengthens its market position across both the private and public sectors.

Maintel CEO Eddie Buxton (*pictured*) commented: "Azzurri has a complementary product offering and target market which will provide enhanced scale and visibility for the combined group. This acquisition will accelerate Maintel's shift into hosted cloud and data, ensuring we are positioned to take advantage of these high growth areas of the UC market.

"It will also build scale in managed services, continuing a shift in our business mix that we have been driving following previous acquisitions."

The enlarged group will provide a suite of solutions and services including a network services division, a mobile unit, managed services plus technology and professional services.

Last month Maintel posted revenues for 2015 of £50.6m, up from £41.9m in 2014.

Philip Carse, Principal Analyst at Megabuyte, observed: "Maintel's purchase of Azzurri is 12x current EBITDA, almost trebling its revenue base and unlocking significant synergies.

"If the integration is achieved successfully, this will truly mark a transformative deal for Maintel, taking it close to Alternative Networks' revenues, though smaller in EBITDA terms." **Cont' on p8 col 3**

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EDITOR'S COMMENT

Stuart Gilroy

IS A REVISION of the comms lexicon long overdue? Our industry has earned a well deserved reputation for confusing the sense out of customers with modern jargon and clever acronyms. Even worse, some long-term industry players are dissatisfied with aspects of the language of comms and can themselves become frustrated. Our 'dictionary' grows ever bigger as word creation breeds more confusion. Surely there is a need to instate measures that will tip the word-weighted scale in favour of balance, simplicity and transparency of meaning, while more aptly describing our modern times.

Even as the word craft runs away with itself (the various flavours of connectivity are one example of acronym overload), the industry is perhaps held back by immovable cornerstones, those words that remain stuck in their time zone but still carry weight in terms of common usage with no suitable alternative likely to be adopted any time soon.

With such a current zeal for new terms and acronyms, perhaps there has never been a better time to revisit stock in trade industry categories such as Call Management, Billing and even Unified Communications. These labels no longer seem enough to signify just how far their segments have evolved technologically and professionally.

On considering these stuck in the mud terms, we naturally ask questions about the true nature of those categories, and are left with a sense of empty dissatisfaction about their naming. The English language is the most flexible and forgiving in the world, and our industry has taken full advantage of its malleability, but often creates the wrong influence. In this issue we explore the current state of 'Call Management' and 'Billing', and expose the limitations of industry nomenclature, as highlighted by Phillip Reynolds, joint CEO at Oak Innovation, on page 48: "As someone who has been in call management for 30 years, I really struggle with the term."

Stuart Gilroy, Editor

GCI snaffles up key acquisition target

MANAGED services provider GCI has added more scale and skills to the business following the acquisition of Essex-based Fusion Media Networks for an undisclosed sum.

GCI CEO Adrian Thirkill revealed that the firm's gaze had fallen on Fusion at least two years ago as a potential future acquisition target.

"We have been keeping a quiet eye on its progress," he commented. "As part of the GCI family Fusion's customers will now benefit from our scale, managed services portfolio and our multi-million investment in technologies and monitoring and management systems."

Wayne Martin, GCI's founder and Chairman, added: "As I look back on GCI's journey, it's nice to reflect on the many fine organisations that are now woven into our DNA.

"They build scale, add new and contemporary services, bring a depth of technical experience and, piece-by-piece, they are transforming GCI into something special.

"The old adage that technology waits for no man is never more evident, and the pace of change is quickening. So our aim, through rolling acquisition

Adrian Thirkill

and continual up-skilling, is to keep ahead of the curve in order to keep our customers in front. It's as simple as that."

Thirkill noted that GCI's acquisition activity is just one strand of its growth plan.

"In the last four months alone we have assembled a seasoned and proven leadership team with decades of experience in what 'good' looks like," he commented.

"There is now a palpable energy building across GCI and a common objective.

"Our growth will not just come from acquisitions, but from the joined-up effort of empowered staff, good management and clear direction. These

are early days in the next stage of GCI's journey, but I feel the company is tracking nicely as we continue our push through the MSP premiership. But there is more to do and more to come – watch this space."

Lee Norvall, CEO at Essex-based Fusion Media, added: "Building Fusion has been my passion and total focus over the last few years.

"The fact that it is now part of the GCI Group feels right.

"GCI's grasp of the fast changing technology landscape and its consultative approach is exactly right."

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COMMENT: UNDERDOGS ON TOP

Richard Carter

SPORTING success has synergies with business triumphs, which makes it easy to be inspired by rank outsiders who beat the odds and come out on top. As a golfer, I watched with surprise as a relative unknown from Yorkshire, Danny Willett, took the green jacket at the Augusta Masters, the first major of the season. Willett was the last to register for the event and was unsure if he would be able to play due to the imminent birth of his first child.

Out on the course he stayed calm under intense pressure and when his main rival 'blew up' on one of the final holes he took full advantage to become the first English winner in 20 years.

Nearer to home, the exploits of Leicester City have turned the football world on its head. Leicester were 5,000-1 outsiders to win the Premier League at the start of the season and at the time of writing they were on course to be crowned Kings of England for the first time in their 132 year history.

It's being hailed as the greatest achievement in modern day football, a sport awash with multi-million-pound international stars more often found plying their trade at Old Trafford, Stamford Bridge or The Etihad Stadium. For the good of the game I hope Leicester keep their team together, but somehow I doubt the romance will last too much longer.

So what do these surprise sporting feats show us about maintaining a competitive advantage in our own industry? Big or small, we can all achieve success based on belief, teamwork, skill, hard work and a little luck. We can all reach the top if we are on our game.

Richard Carter, Group Sales and Business Development Director, Nimans

6DG picks up cloud provider Carrenza

SIX Degrees Group (6DG) has pocketed cloud service provider Carrenza in a move that ticks three strategic boxes, according to CEO Alastair Mills.

"The acquisition strengthens our capabilities for professional and managed services in application and web hosting for mission critical environments," Mills commented.

"It gives us a major presence in the public sector where Carrenza is a strong G-Cloud player; and it brings public cloud integration capabilities that, especially for Amazon Web Services (AWS), are a growing part of the mix for end user customers in an increasingly multi-cloud world."

Carrenza has witnessed significant growth in its IaaS and PaaS cloud services, especially from corporate customers and Government bodies alongside increasing demand to integrate solutions for the public cloud, three sectors that are strategically important for 6DG.

As a public cloud integration specialist Carrenza has key partnerships supporting customers using AWS, VMWare's vCloud Air and Google Cloud Platform (GCP). Private sector customers include RBS, de

Alastair Mills

Bijenkorf and Majestic Wine. A strong third sector presence includes household names like WWF and AgeUK. The company is also an official security certified G-Cloud provider and its public sector base includes Government Digital Service (GDS), DWP and HMRC.

Carrenza CEO Dan Sutherland commented: "This is a logical development for both 6DG and Carrenza. Our heritage in the public sector – with complex private clouds and public cloud integration – is strong and we believe our team can play a vital role in the continued growth of the group."

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Vapour Cloud in fund boost

Tim Mercer

A £1M-PLUS funding boost secured by Vapour will enable the firm to expand its technical and business development teams and enhance its cloud portal capabilities. Vapour plans to double its headcount to 42 in the next 12 months, expand its private MPLS network, move to larger premises with a demonstration suite and launch a new portal. The move also sees Vapour Media rebrand as Vapour Cloud.

The firm has witnessed rapid growth since it was established in 2012 and has previously attracted a multi-million pound venture capital investment.

This time a consortium led by Seneca Partners, including Barclays and Finance Yorkshire, provided the funding, making the cloud service provider the first north of England business to receive Barclays' Innovation Finance Product.

Last year the business merged with Manchester-based Everycloud in a transaction backed by Finance Yorkshire and private investors.

Tim Mercer, co-founder and CEO at Vapour, commented: "In the short time since conception, Vapour has developed over 50 partnerships and secured a number of rounds of equity funding, now with the support of a major high street bank.

"The investment from Seneca Partners, Barclays and Finance Yorkshire is testament to our vision and ambition.

"All of the teams involved demonstrated from the start that they fully understood our market proposition and recognised the potential of the business to achieve rapid growth."

Richard Manley, Director at Seneca Partners, added: "Through our group company Acceleris, Seneca Partners has been involved with Vapour since the EveryCloud merger last year.

"As with the merger and previous funding rounds, Acceleris successfully project managed this £1m-plus fund raise, which was led with a significant equity investment from Seneca's EIS fund. With the new funding and an experienced senior management team in place, the combined business now has the fire power to drive significant growth through its 'one-stop-shop' sales offering."

David Parr, who is the Relationship Director for Barclays based in Manchester, commented: "As part of our plans at Barclays to enhance our high growth offering to the market, we are extending our lending capabilities and credit appetite in the technology sector for ambitious, entrepreneurial businesses like Vapour."

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COMMENT: WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Pete Tomlinson

IT WON'T surprise you to know we've recently been doing a lot of thinking about brand. What makes creating brand value so interesting is that it isn't something that can be bought or sold, it has to come from an authentic place and be the manifestation of everything else you stand for as an organisation. Of course, there is a need to define and promote the brand. However, the real investment in branding comes from budgets that aren't held within the marketing team – colleague recognition, customer experience, innovation, social responsibility – these focus areas are all far greater drivers of brand advocacy than any advertising or messaging campaign.

The other thing to remember about brand is that it's a living thing. A logo, a tone of voice or set of values do not alone make a brand. None of those are the reason people queue all night to get an iPhone or pay a premium to fly Virgin. Rather, it's contextual, it's the hotel receptionist that remembers my favourite room, the apology when something goes wrong or knowing I'll get a call back when they say they will.

It's also about my personality and making choices that other people I identify with make, feeling like I share the same beliefs about what is important in life with the company I'm considering buying from. It's why you feel so disappointed when your favourite brand lets you down. That happened to me recently, but because of that brand's meaning to me I gave them every opportunity to put it right and was so pleased when they did.

Perhaps the most interesting thing about brand is that there is no absolute truth, no right or wrong, just a chance to tell the world about who you want to be and hope that they share your ambitions.

Pete Tomlinson, Director, KCOM

Polycom picked up by predatory Mitel

MITEL'S $1.96bn acquisition of Polycom creates a combined $2.5bn revenue company with a global workforce of approximately 7,700 employees.

The combined company is headquartered in Ottawa, Canada, and will operate under the Mitel name while maintaining Polycom's global brand.

Richard McBee, Mitel's Chief Executive Officer, will lead the enlarged organisation. Steve Spooner, Mitel's Chief Financial Officer, will also continue in that role.

On the closing of the transaction it is expected that Polycom directors will assume two seats on the Mitel board.

"Mitel has a simple vision to provide seamless communications and collaboration to customers," commented McBee.

"To bring that vision to life we are methodically putting the puzzle pieces in place to provide a seamless customer experience across any device and any environment.

"Mitel and Polycom combined will have the talent and technology required to deliver fully integrated solutions to businesses and service providers across enterprise, mobile and cloud environments."

Richard McBee

Peter Leav, President and CEO of Polycom, commented: "Together, Polycom and Mitel expect to drive meaningful value for our shareholders, customers, partners and employees around the world.

"We look forward to working closely with the Mitel team to ensure a smooth transition and continued innovation to bring the workplace of the future to our customers."

The transaction is expected to close in the third quarter of this year subject to customary closing conditions.

Following the closing of the deal former Polycom shareholders are expected to hold approximately 60% and current Mitel shareholders are expected to hold around 40% of the outstanding Mitel common shares.

While Mitel is still early in the process of closing the quarter ended March 31st, 2016, it is expected that revenue and adjusted EBITDA margin will be within the company's prior guidance range.

Based on preliminary information, Mitel expects quarterly non-GAAP revenue to be in the range of $270m to $280m and adjusted EBITDA margin in the range of 7.5% to 9.5%.

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COMMENT: NETWORK INSIGHTS

James Hickman

AS INDIVIDUALS in this digital age, countless organisations hold data about us. There has been a constant battle between privacy and how our data can be used. The arguments vary from the technical to some quite philosophical interpretations of identity. Scott McNealy, while head of Sun stated back in 2008, 'You have no privacy, get over it', which establishes one end of the spectrum of thought. Others are outraged at the level to which data about us is gathered and used. Edward Snowden committed, what is in many eyes a treasonous act in exposing the activities of the US Government and its broad snooping strategy, but what he revealed was eye-opening.

For years, journalists have been keen to dig into such things. There were whispers through the 1990s of a system called Echelon which the UK and US Governments were using to read all our emails and listen to our phone conversations. Investigative journalist Duncan Campbell wrote an article about it in the mid-1990s. Then in 1996, journalist Nicky Hager told the European Parliament enough about how it was being used for them to start realising just how much they were being snooped on.

Currently the Regulation of Investigatory Powers (RIP) Bill is going through the legislative machine in the House of Commons. Were it to be enacted in law in its current format, every IT systems provider in the UK will be compelled to provide the UK Government with security backdoors to allow for access to protected data. Your data. Exactly the principle Apple fought for.

Whether you believe in the right of the Government to access hidden stuff or you are a strong advocate of personal privacy, the laws are being shaped right now and the people making the stuff you trust to keep your data safe are trying hard to keep it that way.

James Hickman, CTO, Virtual1

Hosted pays for ShoreTel

SHORETEL'S financial results for Q3 ended March 31st 2016 reflect accelerating growth in hosted revenues and advances made in key markets.

Total revenue for the period was $85.2m compared to $84.7m in Q3 2015.

"We accelerated both cloud bookings and hosted revenue, with particular strength from mid-market and enterprise customers," commented Don Joos, President and CEO.

"We continued to execute on our five catalysts for growth as we introduced new ShoreTel Connect features, expanded our cloud geographic footprint and launched the premises to cloud migration programme to leverage our installed base to drive hosted revenue growth."

Hosted revenues of $32.8m were up 22% year-over-year and

Don Joos

7% sequentially. Non-GAAP hosted gross margin increased to 53.3% in the third quarter of fiscal 2016, representing an improvement over the 49.8% in the third quarter of 2015.

The total number of installed customer seats increased 27% to approximately 218,000. Hosted revenue churn was 4.7% annualised in the third quarter of fiscal 2016. Product revenues of $33.9m in Q3 2016 were down 14% year-over-year and down 17% sequentially.

Continued from page 1

Philip Carse, Principal Analyst at Megabuyte, added: "Azzurri has had a chequered history as a buy and build that went awry, going through two balance sheet recapitalisations since 2011, resulting in it being owned by six banks.

"Under CEO Chris Jagusz the firm seems to have finally stopped the rot after much focus on the 4Ps: Product development; improved Project delivery to time and budget; Process improvements; and more cost effective Procurement.

"In the year to June 2015, EBITDA grew 18% to £5.9m on revenues down 3.1% at £101m, the first such growth for five years. The main risk is the integration challenge, given that Azzurri is almost double Maintel's size in revenue (£92m versus £51m) and headcount (500 versus 270), and the firm is still going backwards in profit terms. The company will be over 4x bigger than in 2013."

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SHORT CALLS

8x8 has opened a new office in Cluj-Napoca, Romania, as it continues its global expansion. The office, which will be integral to 8x8's research and innovation, is the company's first operations and development centre in Eastern Europe.

Solar Communications has expanded its Solar SIP, Ethernet fibre and DSL offering following an agreement with TalkTalk Business. CEO John Whitty said: "This year is forecast as the crossover point from ISDN to SIP."

Daisy Group has updated the comms infrastructure at a flat once occupied by the legendary guitarist Jimi Hendrix. The London flat, now a museum, benefits from hosted VoIP and dedicated managed broadband provision.

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COMMENT: MARKETING MATTERS

Elvire Gosnold

NEW business start-ups usually have a limited budget and an eagerness to grow the company with a strong focus on sales rather than setting the foundations for an identity and clear vision. It is understandable that there is so much emphasis on sales but unfortunately this often leads to yet another faceless addition to the industry with little differentiation.

Start-ups usually want a logo and a website to get started. While these are undoubtedly essential tools for any business, steaming ahead without answering some basic questions about what your business wants to deliver and represent may result in having to continually readdress this question with unnecessary marketing expense further down the line.

Addressing key strategy questions does not even have to dip into your budget. There are a few basic questions that you should spend some time thinking about as these will form the axis on which your new business will spin. How do you want to be known? What do you want to achieve? What do you bring that is different? What problems are you addressing for clients? What type of business do you want to grow? Where do you want to be in one, three and five years time?

Once you have identified the answers to these questions only then is it time to get started with your logo and website. Having this clear vision will make your brief to the marketing agency a lot clearer and therefore a quicker, more cost-effective exercise.

Elvire Gosnold, Director, Blabbermouth Marketing

• NOT surprisingly, billing platform pioneers have gone in precisely the direction of the industry, led by the cloud, big data and security, and, like Strategic Imperatives, they have themselves become agents of change. (*p30*)

True Telecom hails record sales period

TRUE Telecom has reported the most profitable start to a year in its history after surging sales and the introduction of a field sales operation in January helped its first quarter revenue to rise over 300%.

The jump in figures mainly reflect continuing record sales across all parts of the business from direct sales to channel.

The company also benefitted from its strong position in the market due to the growing popularity of SIP, hosted VoIP, mobile, fibre, broadband and traditional lines and calls, with the addition of merchant services to its portfolio also gaining traction and performing well.

Stuart Griffiths, Chief Executive, called the results 'a giant leap' towards achieving True Telecom's ambition to become one of the largest SME suppliers in the market, hailing Q1 2016 as the start of a 'very special and exciting time' for the company which now has 'all bases covered'.

"Our performance in the first three months of 2016 puts us in a prime position to post yet another record period," commented Griffiths.

"True Telecom is on course for an all-time record month in

Stuart Griffiths

Mark Baines

April and on target for a new record quarter in Q2."

As well as establishing field operations Griffiths said the positive results also reflect the company's focus on growing its outbound teams and improving profitability through rapid customer adoption.

"Within the next quarter we are aiming to add 2,000 small to medium enterprises per month from our direct outbound teams alone," added Griffiths.

Director Mark Baines is also upbeat about the outlook for

2016 and beyond, saying the company's 'dedicated and diligent' approach to breaking sales records will continue to raise growth expectations.

"We are executing our growth strategy well," he commented. "It's a great time to be involved in such an exciting business, and with a great team driving True Telecom forward we are confident that the records will continue to tumble."

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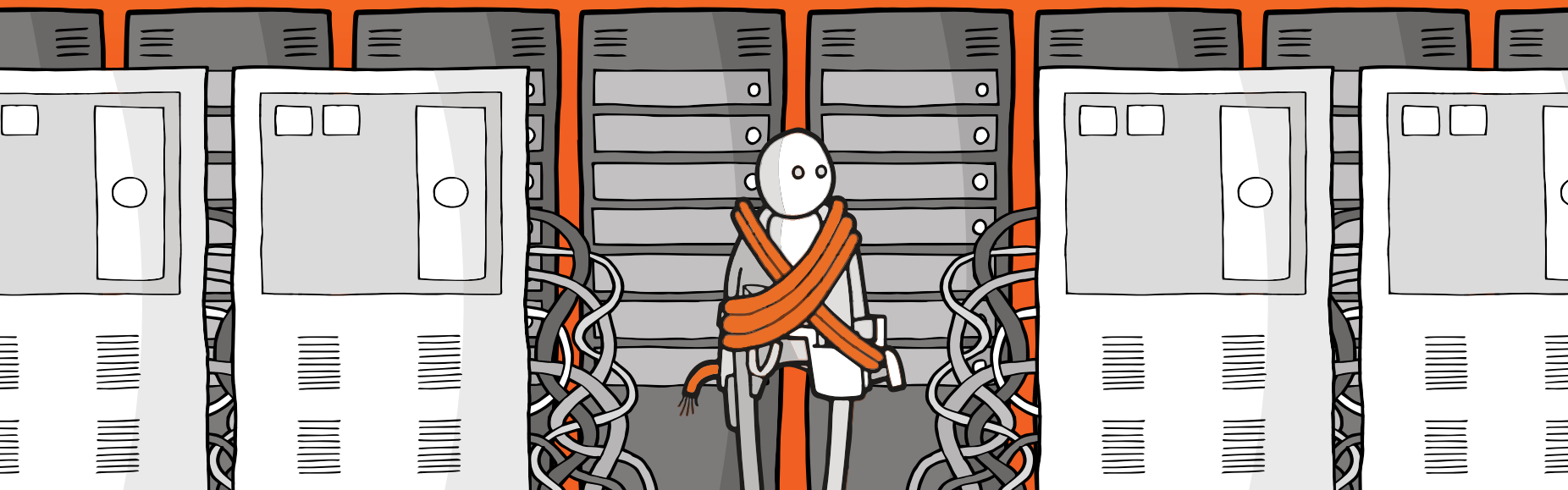
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COMMENT: STRATEGIC TALK

Alex Tempest

LATER this year, Parliament is likely to pass the Investigatory Powers Bill. It will have far-reaching implications for all telecoms providers, as we will all have to change the data we store on customers and how we share that with the police and state bodies. As the Bill progresses through Parliament it's crucial we think about understanding what it means for our business and what we can do to help our partners prepare.

It's obvious that a new Bill is needed. The current system is complex and some pieces of legislation that outline what CPs should do are due to expire at the end of the year. This is a good time for us all to debate what powers law enforcement should have to help keep us safe on and off line. However, the current Bill is not without its critics. As Apple's recent battle with the FBI shows, the balance between privacy and security is a sensitive one.

The Bill is currently being scrutinised line-by-line, and the details are still under review. However, it's likely that proposals to store Internet Connection Records for 12 months will be included in the final Act, even though the exact information we'll have to record may well change between now and then. But whatever the final legislation, it is likely that we will all have to store significantly more customer data than we already do.

The boundary between new business and Government and what our obligation is for a clear line of communication needs to be understood, as the level of security that is needed to keep businesses and customers safe will have an impact on every single provider.

The key role for the partner community is to ensure there is a strong relationship with customers and that their security and privacy are of the upmost priority.

Alex Tempest, Director of Partners, TalkTalk Business

CityFibre signs two Yorkshire partners

EXA Networks and Diva Telecom are to leverage CityFibre's newly acquired network assets in Leeds and Bradford, adding 350 new sites in the region.

Exa Networks has committed 250 new connections and will focus on leveraging the city's dark fibre network.

The firm has also agreed a national deal with CityFibre to target the education sector where it has a strong presence as a provider of connectivity and filtering services.

Diva Telecom has a large customer base in Leeds and made an initial commitment of 100 connections.

With a combined duct route length of approximately 190 kilometres CityFibre's Leeds and Bradford networks are among the larger assets acquired in the January acquisition of KCOM's national fibre and duct network assets for £90m.

Greg Mesch, Chief Executive of CityFibre, commented: "Exa and Diva are both highly commercial organisations with great local market knowledge and a hard-earned reputation for delivering value to their customers. This is the beginning of our journey together."

Greg Mesch

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NEWVOICEMEDIA has raised over £7,000 for Naomi House & Jacksplace, a Hampshire-based charity that supports children and young adults with life limiting and life threatening conditions in central southern England. Rohini Bali, NewVoiceMedia Foundation Manager, commented: "We have increased our commitment to integrated philanthropy over the last year, and are able to give something back to the community while supporting the causes that are important to our employees."

Ruckus deal creates new powerhouse
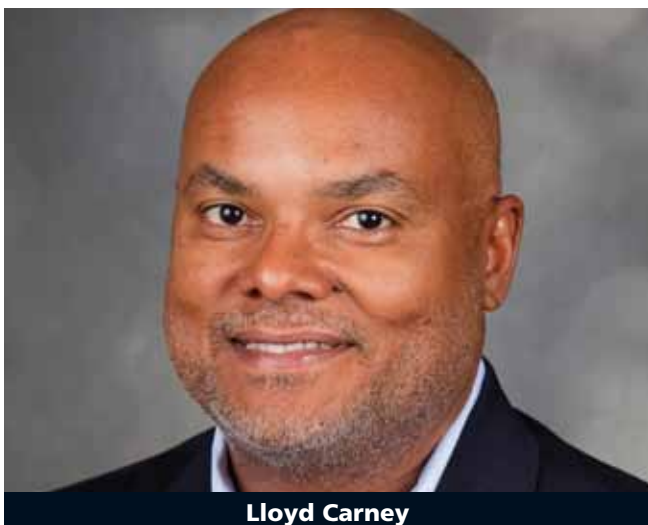
Lloyd Carney

BROCADE'S ambition to be a pure-play networking powerhouse has been boosted by the acquisition of Ruckus Wireless.

The deal expands Brocade's enterprise networking portfolio with Ruckus' wireless products and also bolsters Brocade's presence in the broader service provider space with the Ruckus Wi-Fi offering.

The deal values Ruckus at around $1.5bn and the cash portion of the purchase price will be funded through a combination of cash and new bank term loan financing.

The Ruckus organisation will be led by current CEO Salina Lo who reports to Brocade CEO Lloyd Carney.

The acquisition is expected to accelerate cross-selling activities into the respective companies' partner and customer bases. The deal also strengthens Brocade's ability to pursue emerging market opportunities around 5G mobile services, the Internet of Things, Smart Cities, OpenGtm technology for in-building wireless and LTE/Wi-Fi convergence.

Carney noted that wireless is a 'critical access technology' and the combination of Brocade and Ruckus creates a 'new type' of pure-play networking company with solutions spanning from the core of data centres to the wireless network edge.

"This strategic combination will position us to expand our addressable market with Ruckus' wireless LAN products, and supports our vision to deliver new IP solutions that enable the network to become a platform for innovation," commented Carney.

"History shows that focused pure-play companies often innovate faster, are more agile and deliver better value to their customers. We are positioning ourselves to where technology is headed."

Salina Lo, President and CEO of Ruckus, added: "We operate in adjacent segments of the larger networking market with a number of common customers for our products and have a successful track record of working together."

Brocade expects the transaction to be accretive to its non-GAAP earnings by its first quarter of fiscal 2017.

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COMMENT: BUY CHEAP, BUY TWICE

Clifford Norton

WHAT do you do when one of your main suppliers lets you down? There is nothing more frustrating than being let down by a supplier, especially given the exclusivity that many providers insist on. What is vital to any business is having a cohesive, manageable contingency plan for when, inevitably, problems occur. As with any business decision there are a number of deciding factors when choosing a supplier. However, we are seeing an increasing trend of businesses opting for those that offer the lowest available price – but is that really the best decision?

Perhaps in the short-term opting for the lowest price makes sense, but scratch the surface a little and what often sounds too good to be true, usually is. Is your service secure? Are you and your customers properly supported? What happens when you do indeed encounter problems? Do you have a back-up? How easy is it to speak to someone who can actually do something helpful? These are questions we all have to ask ourselves, and ultimately decide what's best for our partners and their customers.

What is far too common it seems, is this 'slopey shoulder' attitude, relinquishing any iota of responsibility when a situation does occur. Too often, time is spent avoiding blame rather than finding a solution. Days quickly become weeks, weeks then become months and before you know it, you are left with an unhappy customer, an angry partner and a sour relationship with a supplier.

Issues in our industry are unfortunately inevitable, but what is critical is damage limitation. Ensure you grasp fully your supplier's SLAs and escalation process. Be well aware of who to contact as and when you need them. Most importantly, look past the price tag. The old saying of 'buy cheap, you buy twice' rings true, even in telecoms.

Clifford Norton, Managing Director, Channel Telecom

Event offers clients an Alternative view

OVER 150 customers and prospects converged on Alternative Networks's FusionLIVE 2016 event at the end of last month.

Held at Victoria House in London the showcase was designed to provide a deep insight into the service provider's proposition set, which is built around workspace, collaboration, infrastructure, visibility and control.

The Alternative Networks creative team used the sprawling whitewashed basement of the neoclassical building as a canvas to create a series of sets, tech bars, theatres and workspaces, to reinforce Alternative's consolidated 'device to data centre' propositions.

The busy tech bars enabled delegates to talk and test products openly with experts from Alternative and vendor partners, while a packed keynote theatre provided a series of business IT focused presentations from Microsoft, Avaya, Citrix, Wandera and Netapp.

Alternative has had a hectic 18 months following the acquisitions of InterceptIT and ControlCircle, and the opening of its new group headquarters and concept lab at 240 Blackfriars Road in London.

The company's products and services portfolio now includes cloud computing, virtualisation, managed hosting, fixed line voice, mobile, systems, IP networks and complex billing software solutions.

Nick Burrows, Proposition Director at Alternative, said: "FusionLIVE gives our customers access to a range of resources they need to make the right choices for optimising, augmenting and developing their IT infrastructures and delivering tangible business outcomes.

"By bringing everything together under one roof, customers have the opportunity to see how things work both individually and as a whole, hence the name Fusion."

Pictured above are Alternative Networks's Fusion-LIVE creators Aidan Jackson (Communications Director), Nick Burrows (Proposition Director) and Suzanne Langton (Marketing Manager).

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New Product Launch

Daisy's New Break-Fix Maintenance

Another service designed specifically for the channel

Provides a maintenance service in the event of IT or telephony hardware failure.
Fast and efficient repair to keep your customers up and running.

helping your business **grow**

Portal in top order following updates

ABZORB'S latest portal rev-amp reflects continuing developments to order processing, in particular for mobile services, enabling resellers to better manage their mobile proposition and make faster connections.

"These new improvements include the ability to allocate bars and services, amend tariff and bundle pricing, and an automated allocation of a relevant mobile number when creating a mobile order," commented Mark Riddell, Abzorb's Head of Indirect Channel.

New mobile functions such as improved bundle management mean changes made to a connection's bundles integrate directly with Abzorb's network level provisioning processes.

Mark Riddell

Another important development is the Abzorb API, a toolkit for partners who build their own software and want to integrate more closely with the Abzorb's systems.

"This means managing mobile orders, connections, bars, SIMs, customers and tasks can all be processed from their own in-house systems, reducing or eliminating the need to retrain staff," commented Riddell.

Abzorb has also introduced a white label reseller branded customer care portal enabling customers to manage their own mobility requirements.

Riddell added: "More portal developments are on the way, such as the ability to authorise reseller orders for distributor users, hosted centrex ordering, tighter integration with the Syniverse MNP platform, more useful informatics and reporting, and a fresh new design across the portal."

Wi-Fi vendor selects ICON

A HOTLY tipped US-based Wi-Fi vendor has joined forces with distributor ICON as part of its aggressive global expansion plan.

St Albans-based ICON will distribute the 4ipnet range of Wi-Fi infrastructure solutions, provide third line support for the UK channel and deliver 4ipnet product training for UK engineering and sales teams.

ICON's Sales Director Mark Shane commented: "The UK reseller channel now has access to a range of Wi-Fi solutions that have been winning business from the major enterprise Wi-Fi vendors in country markets around the globe.

"We believe that the 4ipnet Wi-Fi solutions will become a significant revenue earner for the channel, displacing many

Mark Shane

of the traditional enterprise Wi-Fi vendors from their preferred supplier position.

"A report by US industry watcher Network Computing ranked 4ipnet as one of only 12 Wi-Fi vendors to watch alongside companies such as Cisco Meraki, and described 4ipnet as a company looking to aggressively expand into regions around the globe."

6DG snares Microsoft expert Insite

AS COMMS Dealer went to press, Six Degrees Group (6DG) bolstered its Microsoft capabilities with the acquisition of application hosting specialist Insite, a leading provider of Microsoft Dynamics AX hosting and managed services in the cloud.

Insite owns and operates its own tier 3 data centre where it hosts private cloud infrastructure, dedicated to each client, upon which it builds tailored platforms to operate ERP and CRM platforms, predominantly but not exclusively for Microsoft applications.

Alastair Mills, CEO of 6DG, commented: "This is a continuation of our goal to enhance our capabilities in mission-critical application hosting, with a secure and compliant wrap, for business and government customers. It also provides Microsoft Azure expertise in the public cloud for both IaaS and PaaS, as well as a strong ISV partner channel."

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ACTIVE Digital has scooped a brace of O2 industry awards (the Digital Excellence and Customer Excellence gongs), repeating last year's double award win. Business Director Jo Wimble-Groves said: "We understand the challenges IT Directors are facing when focusing on mobile strategy and we are working hard to deliver results for our customers and O2." Pictured above left to right: Darren Buttrick, O2 SMB Sales Director; Jo Wimble-Groves; and Jason Phillips, O2 Head of Partners Sales.

SHORT CALL

A new ordering service launched by Jola Cloud Solutions allows partners to build co-branded online sales proposals for multiple products in one portal, and send them directly to end users. Andrew Dickinson, MD, said: "Jola dealers can now build an online quote for connectivity, hosted voice and mobile SIMs in minutes. The customer only needs to click on a link in the email to place their order."

ITP set for June seminar

THE Institute of Telecommunications Professionals (ITP) has revealed more details about its annual seminar on June 23rd at the BT Centre, London.

This year's seminar will reflect the history and future of telecommunications with key topics discussed by industry leading lights.

Philip Nugent, Technical Director at Mpirical, will open the event with an overview of the history of telecoms, highlighting the convergence of PSTN, Internet, mobile, LAN and IMS Systems, as well as examining key milestones.

The future of the network will be examined by Dr Timothy Whitley, MD Research & Innovation and Adastral Park, BT. Paul Adams, Marketing Director at Nokia, will discuss the case for 5G, while Ray O'Hanlon, BT Technical Solutions Architect at Cisco will look at the future of the cloud and data centre. The session will be followed by questions and answers.

"The future is about allowing people to interact with everything digitally," stated Crissi Williams, Head of Operations at the ITP. "In essence, to have the digital world as a natural extension of our lives."

SHORT CALL

Alcatel-Lucent Enterprise (ALE) has appointed Jack Chen as company CEO, replacing acting CEO Jeff Ma who will continue as a board member of ALE Holdings. Chen comes to ALE with more than 25 years of experience in the telecoms industry. Prior to joining he was the head of the APAC and China Wireless business in Alcatel-Lucent, where he doubled the wireless business in three years.

Gamma brings call control to SIP deals

GAMMA has ramped up its play in the SIP space and is targeting the vibrant ISDN replacement market with its new SIP Trunk Call Manager service that, says the firm, gives customers more than cost savings and enables partners to add value to their SIP propositions via centralised instant call control.

"SIP Trunk Call Manager will enable channel partners to offer customers a smarter SIP trunk service to differentiate their proposition and open up new areas in the market," stated Roy Farrow, Advanced Services Product Manager at Gamma.

"Business continuity will be at its heart, enabling feature-rich call control in the network and giving users full access and

Roy Farrow

control of the service through a mobile app."

According to Gamma, by the start of 2016 almost two million SIP channels were migrated from ISDN leaving 1.5 million still to be migrated, a million

of which are expected to move within the next two years.

"The clock is ticking, so now is the time to add further value to our SIP Trunk service with SIP Trunk Call Manager and help our partners move away from price-led conversations in an increasingly crowded 'me too' market," added Farrow.

Gamma is currently beta testing with a number of partners and expects to launch mid-May. One trialist, Nick Ward, Senior Product Manager at Intercity Technology, commented: "It's great to see Gamma finding a way to put value and margin back into SIP Trunking."

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Midlands HQ for Advanced

FAST expanding software provider Advanced has made its mark in the midlands with the opening of a regional HQ at The Mailbox in Birmingham and the launch of a recruitment programme to fill 1,000 roles over the next 18 months.

The positions are open to graduates and non-graduates of all ages and backgrounds wanting a career in IT.

At least 50% of the new starters will come from a talent acquisition programme, and 400 of the new roles will be based in Advanced's newly refurbished midlands HQ which occupies 45,000 sq ft of space on The Mailbox's third level, making it one of the city's largest commercial accommodations on a single floor.

Gordon Wilson, CEO, said: "The launch of our Birmingham office is a key milestone in our growth strategy and the talent acquisition programme represents an opportunity for individuals considering a career in IT. Birmingham has the UK's largest regional urban economy and is the most popular destination outside the south east for mass millennial migration."

Neil Rami, Chief Executive, Marketing Birmingham, com-

Gordon Wilson

mented: "Advanced has a large local talent base from which to recruit, with some 40,000 students studying computer science or business in Birmingham each year."

Advanced employs 2,000 people and has a customer base of more than 20,000 organisations including Virgin Trains, Harvey Nichols, Birmingham Children's Hospital and Care-watch. Following its acquisition by Vista Equity Partners in March 2015 Advanced has undergone significant transformation and investment.

The company has grown into a £750m business in eight years and is on the road to completing a four stage programme of rebranding, relocation, restructure and recruitment.

Blackpool on-boards TES Wireless

LEYLAND-based TES Wireless Communications has secured a managed service contract with Blackpool Transport to upgrade the organisation's radio communications systems.

The deal incorporates a three site MPT1327 trunked radio system providing an always-on connection between bus or tram drivers and control rooms.

Blackpool Transport covers 4.4 million passenger miles per year and carries 20 million passengers, 10 million during the holiday season.

Keith Edwards, MD of TES, commented: "The system is unlike a mobile network so won't have coverage issues, drop out or be switched off in an emergency situation."

TES has provided communications solutions to a number of transport networks including London Underground, Manchester Metro link and Metro do Porto.

In February TES won a tender to supply radio infrastructure, two-way radios and comms accessories to universities across the UK.

Provista UK has gained Cisco Gold Partner status, making it the only independent firm with a HQ in Scotland to be awarded the certification. The designation, the highest partner level from Cisco, is achieved by only 2% of UK firms. Operations Director Barry Oliver said: "Joining an elite set of Cisco Gold partners in our tenth year is testament to the efforts of all our staff and the support of our customers."

Skyscape leverages people power

SKYSCAPE Cloud Services is on course to double its headcount by the end of 2016 having already grown more than tenfold in four years.

The company has achieved success over a short period of time, winning contracts across central and local Government, developing a partner community of more than 200 companies and attracting industry recognition, most recently winning the Communications category of the Deloitte Technology Fast 500 EMEA Award.

Simon Hansford

Skyscape is focused solely on serving the UK public sector and supporting the digital transformation of public services.

So far this year, Skyscape has hired 33 new people across

its customer services, technical and development teams and is set to welcome 10 new students as part of its undergraduate programme. The company is also intending to fill a further 60 technical and dedicated customer service roles.

"We recognise that our continued success doesn't just depend on technical innovation but also on the intellectual creativity and calibre of our people," commented Simon Hansford, CEO of Skyscape Cloud Services.

"We have seen exponential growth in a relatively short amount of time since our debut on the first iteration of the G-Cloud Framework.

"To maintain service levels and ensure we continue to be disruptive in terms of how ICT can be delivered, we invest in recruitment ahead of demand.

"And when recruiting we focus on ensuring we offer careers and opportunities for top IT talent who want to make a genuine difference to UK customers and citizens."

IP system in hot demand

SAMSUNG'S SCM-Compact pure IP telephony solution launched on February 24th at the Belfry is proving popular among the vendor's partner base with 30 resellers already equipped to sell and support the system following four fully sub-scribed sales training days and three technical training courses.

"Due to high demand we are organising additional tech-nical training dates for May," commented Wilf Wood, Senior Product Manager of Samsung Enterprise Networks.

"The success of the SCM-Compact release shows that there is still a large demand for on-premise equipment in the UK market."

Over 100 Samsung partners attended the launch event that also signalled the Korean ven-dor's intention to turn up the heat in the UK SMB market with its appliance-based version of the larger SCM-Express sys-tem that offers a comprehensive wireless solution.

Samsung has positioned itself as a 'wireless communica-tion platform provider' and is closely aligned to the market projections of industry watch-ers such as IDC which calcu-lates that 75% of the western

Wilf Wood

European workforce will be mobile by 2018.

"Samsung's ability to inte-grate with our mobile devices to provide a mobility solution for the workforce has strongly resonated with resellers and end customers," added Wood.

The new system belongs to the Samsung Communication Manager (SCM) family as a complement to OfficeServ and the vendor's hybrid range.

The SCM Compact scales up from 16 to 512 extensions, with its sweet spot being 16 to circa 300 extensions. This means Samsung resellers are able to approach 76% of the UK market.

Riverbed's fresh look at channel

RIVERBED is strengthening its partner strategy with updates to existing channel programmes and the introduction of new ini-tiatives such as a track for man-aged services and a Consulting Partner scheme. The company is also investing in its value added distributor programme.

"Riverbed is doubling down on its investment in our part-ners," stated Karl Meulema, Senior VP for Global Channels.

"We are making resource, programme and IP investments designed to engage with our partners at the customer level, build differentiated embedded solutions and services, create a partner services economy and develop revenue and services opportunities for our partners in the channel-led space.

"Technology including mobile, SaaS and cloud are dis-rupting business models, pro-viding new ways to engage and connect with customers as well as entirely new routes to mar-ket," Meulema added.

"These updates to our part-ner programme are designed to help our partners make this mar-ket shift."

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Unify gearing up

OVER 250 global channel partners converged on Unify's Partner Conference staged in Barcelona to hear the vendor's growth plans and also learn that more than 50% of product sales are now conducted through the partner channel.

Unify (which was acquired from Gores Group and Siemens by Atos in November 2015) has witnessed its partner programme more than double in size to over 2,000 in 50-plus countries, along with 13 new distributors. During the past year Unify has

generated a 30% increase in the number of partners completing certifications on the Unify port-folio, with over 25% of them holding Master or Professional level certifications.

Six months after making Circuit certifications available 370 partners have begun selling the solution.

Unify's Chief Executive Office Jon Pritchard comment-ed: "In Barcelona we shared how we continue to enhance our operations to drive greater business to our partners."

SHORT CALL

Solar Communications has extended its Mitel relationship with the launch of Solar Cloud UC using the vendor's MiCloud Office cloud platform. Solar will offer multiple deployment options starting with a standard IP telephony system with the option of adding multiple scalable features such as instant messaging, presence, softphone functionality and contact centre features when required.

Gigaclear in funding deal

Matthew Hare

PURE fibre network builder Gigaclear has secured an additional £24m in new equity to drive the build of Fibre-To-The-Premises (FTTP) networks to homes and businesses.

Led by Infracapital and Woodford Investment Management the investment was fully subscribed by Gigaclear's existing shareholders and follows the £20m-plus EIB loan facility announced in January.

Gigaclear offers customers speeds up to 1Gbps via fibre optic cable in areas typically under served by the existing large broadband providers. The company has built and operates 60 rural fibre networks with a further 25 in construction. It targets a market of 1.5 million households and businesses across thousands of rural communities seeking ultrafast and reliable broadband.

Matthew Hare, Chief Executive of Gigaclear, stated: "We are building to tens of thousands of potential new customers this year. The strong financial support of our shareholders lets us get on with the job of delivering future-proof broadband without delay." **See p34**

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Nimans adds trade counter

NIMANS has extended its trade counter service with the launch of a new 10,000 sq ft unit in Trafford Park, Manchester, adding to an existing service at the distributor's Salford HQ.

"I started Nimans more than 30 years ago by opening a trade counter and repairing radio equipment," stated Chairman Julian Niman. "It's always been my ambition to develop more."

The facility offers hundreds of new product lines and will be led by Geoff Wilde and Bob Hinder who share more than 40 years experience in working with data infrastructure.

New product lines include cable management tools, cabinets, trunking, fibre, power distribution and labelling machines plus accessories.

Nimans has also introduced new brands such as Super Rod (cable rods), Dymo (labelling), Draper (tools), Faithful (tools) as well as basket and cable trays plus accessories.

"Thousands of lines are available for immediate collection," added Niman. "This new facility offers customers the chance to conveniently pick up a much bigger range of products and take advantage of expert advice from Geoff and Bob."

Hinder, Niman & Wilde

The Trafford Part trade counter includes a training room and is located on the outskirts of the city close to the M602 and M60 motorways and opens for business at 8.30am.

SAMSUNG has crowned 4Com as its leading reseller of Samsung UC solutions worldwide. Peter Law, Samsung's Channel and Distribution Manager, stated: "4Com's rapid growth has helped boost our own market share in the UK." 4Com Chairman and MD Daron Hutt added: "This is a great example of two companies succeeding by making the customer experience central to what they do and how they do it." Pictured: Peter Law (left) and Daron Hutt.

Deverill scooped

MANAGED service provider 365itms has snapped up IT services, support and training business Deverill.

The deal broadens 365itms's range of technology and services, enabling it to provide end-to-end solutions.

The acquisition also doubles the size of the company to a £20m turnover business with offices in Poole and Reading.

The enlarged organisation holds a number of vendor accreditations including VMWare, HP, Cisco, Microsoft, Dell and Citrix along with other household name manufacturers.

365itms MD Steve Ellis said: "Deverill's infrastructure and managed service capabilities are broad and deep. Our partners and customers will have access to an enhanced range of services and a larger skilled team."

Jay Bradley, Head of Vendor Engagement at Deverill, commented on the deal: "Two successful companies joining forces in non-competing sectors gives us a great opportunity to build the business."

Hosted for distie

SCANSOURCE Communications Europe is set to launch a new cloud solutions programme under its existing hosted brand VaaS-t following a link-up with data centre and connectivity provider Virtual1. The hosted solution will be based on Unify's OpenScape Business system.

The move is a response to high demand for cloud solutions and hosted UC and introduces subscription-based, cost per-user per-month license models with cloud-based, on-premises or hybrid deployment options.

"Many of our resellers were looking at alternative solutions to our on-premises systems as a number of their end user customers have now adopted a cloud-based strategy," stated Paul Emery, Director of Technical and Services, ScanSource Communications Europe.

"We have responded to this market change by establishing our cloud solutions for voice as well as video."

The UK is the first market to launch new cloud solutions under VaaS-t.

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List makes a growth Leap

Dominic List

STERLING efforts to protect customers from cybercrime have secured Comtact a place in The Leap 100 2016, a list of the 100 fast growth companies in the UK, launched by Mishcon de Reya and City AM.

All companies selected have demonstrated substantial growth over the past 12 months and have been identified as 'ones to watch' for 2016.

Comtact has continued to invest heavily in its people and 24x7x365 Network Operations Centre (NOC). Last year the facility was expanded into a SOC (Security Operations Centre) to help organisations combat cybercrime.

Dominic List, Chairman, said: "This year we broadened our proposition to help our customers protect against the real threat of cyber attack or ransomware. With 80% of companies unaware they have already been breached, we added our managed cyber security solution to the portfolio to help our customers take back control.

"Alongside our complementary infrastructure management solution, Aurora365, we're providing secure IT and eliminating downtime.

"We've also seen increased adoption of our intelligent Wi-Fi tracking solutions, especially in the healthcare sector."

Guru set to launch WebRTC

CONTENT Guru is poised to launch WebRTC integration with its storm LOSS utilities solution. According to the firm this development improves the LOSS service by enabling utilities organisations to more effectively engage with customers across enhanced collaboration, voice-to-browser communication and video conferencing.

Shub Naha, Content Guru's Business Development Director, commented: "The utilities sector faces a blend of challenges. Supplies are often victim to unpredictable outages and today's consumer demands real-time updates on the channels of their choice.

"The LOSS suite of solutions enables utilities organisations to better handle unpredictable spikes in volume by delivering multi-channel cloud communications with scale-on-demand capabilities.

"WebRTC integration allows us to take our utilities offering to the next plane and also delivers a rich seam of opportunities to engage with consumers and collaborate with colleagues in real-time."

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Exertis seals Siracom buy

Phil Brown

EXERTIS has bagged Basingstoke-based wireless distributor Siracom for an undisclosed sum. Siracom employs 15 staff and supplies wireless infrastructure and security products to over 1,000 UK partners.

According to Exertis the acquisition is an 'excellent strategic fit' to its channel proposition which now covers server, storage, networking, UC, security and wireless networking.

Phil Brown, IT Sales and Commercial Director for UK at Exertis, said: "The hard work begins now as we set about integrating Siracom and its team into our business."

Siracom MD David Thompson commented: "The Siracom team has built a great business and a great reputation in the field of Wi-Fi and Wi-Fi security. To join with Exertis, its broad market reach and expertise in logistics and marketing, is a compelling proposition."

Exertis partners with 350 global technology brands and over 22,850 resellers and retailers across Europe.

Westcoast deal

IT DISTRIBUTOR Westcoast has bagged Nottingham-based distie ArtSystems for an undisclosed sum.

ArtSystems provides services and solutions to support printing, offering technical consultancy, demonstration services, logistics and pre and post sales engineering to the design, graphics, signage, display and 3D markets.

During the past 24 months the company has witnessed significant success in 3D printing solutions in particular.

Westcoast's MD Duncan Forsyth commented: "This acquisition represents a game-changing opportunity for Westcoast. ArtSystems has been a driving force in the development of the wide format sector and next generation 3D printing. Both industries are growing hard and fast."

Steve Hawker, MD of ArtSystems, commented: "With investment from Westcoast we now have the opportunity to scale our solutions for suppliers and customers."

BURY-based Pennine Telecom has marked its 40th anniversary with a shift into hosted telephony. The company was founded on 1st May 1976 as a two-way radio servicing business before diversifying in the 1980s into the newly liberalised telecoms sector and then into data and wireless networking. The £8m turnover business now offers voice, data, networks, radio and mobile expertise to private and public sector organisations nationwide.

Pennine's MD Andrew Roberts said: "The time is now coming for hosted telephony and we'll be launching our own offering in what is a milestone year for the business. The key lesson learned over the past 40 years is that you have to keep moving and keep identifying the technologies that will help us all communicate and work more effectively. Hosted is clearly among those, but The Internet of Things will be truly transformative, presenting both challenges and opportunities to companies like Pennine."

Chess focuses on the future

Chess CEO David Pollock (left) and John Pett

THE Chess Partner Services Conference 2016 staged at the Hilton in Northampton and attended by 150 partners proved to be a springboard event for a number of new products and partner initiatives.

The 'Back to the Future' themed conference had a particular focus on 'products of the future' and served as a backdrop to the roll out of new commercials including a reduction in the cost of fixed lines, calls and data; and the introduction of three mobile airtime revenue share options.

The event included a keynote on the Internet of Things (IoT), demonstrations of the Chess Cloud PBX solution and the launch of Chess Insurance which enables partners to attach insurance to handsets at point of sale via an online portal.

Chess Partner Services MD John Pett stated. "This year's conference was a key milestone with the launch of new commercials, new products and the Elite Partner Programme."

The Elite Partner Programme enables partners who beat their previous quarter's performance to redeem points for prizes, including a trip to the Northern Lights or a weekend in Paris.

Chess Partner Services also launched a 30 day Never Beaten on Price Challenge.

NIMANS welcomed 18 children from Bury and Whitefield Jewish Primary School and gave them a guided tour of the company's Manchester HQ. The 10-11-year-olds also took part in an interactive presentation, learned how a phone system and two-way radios operate, got the inside view on video conferencing, and learned about aspects of Nimans' operations including sales, logistics, marketing, purchasing and IT. Nimans' Sue Goldfine commented: "The children were enthusiastic and keen to discover what makes a big company tick. They asked interesting questions and left with big smiles on their faces."

Network firm gets new unit

GLOBAL network access company The Kenton Group has established a new business unit, operating under the name Kenton Optical and Fibre Technologies, building on its network access, demarcation and connectivity solutions.

The new business division, headed up by Andy Howard, will provide optical networking and fibre solutions and services to carriers, operators, service providers, enterprises and governmental organisations in the UK and EMEA.

"Kenton Optical and Fibre Technologies was created in response to customer demand for optical, OTN, WDM and 100G service delivery platforms and networking equipment," explained MD John Larkin.

"These capabilities expand our connectivity solutions and allow us to address new customer segments."

Howard has worked in the optical networking industry since 1997 within engineering, product management and sales at companies including Nortel Networks, Transmode, BTI Systems and Cyan.

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SHORT CALL

Hats off to TalkTalk Business for collecting the EMEA Cloud Service Provider of the Year Award from Mitel. Jon Nowell, Head of Product Management, TalkTalk Business, commented. "We set out a few years ago to carefully build a cloud platform based on Mitel technology. Over the last 12 months we've aggressively grown the platform and have steep growth ambitions for the future."

US firm sets up UK office

Stephen Hackett

US-BASED technology services distributor Intelisys Communications has expanded its operations into Europe and appointed Stephen Hackett to lead the venture.

Hackett brings 15 years telecoms industry experience to the role and moves from NFON where he was Channel Sales Manager. Previous roles include notable stints at Orange Business Services, Gamma Business Communications, Level 3 Communications and Telstra Europe.

According to Hackett, Intelisys' aggressive international ambitions are to on-board new sales partners to sell telecom, connectivity and cloud services via the US two-tier distribution channel model.

"Intelisys will make this alternate distribution model a reality outside of the United States," said Hackett. "The immediate challenge is also our greatest initial opportunity – gaining access to the bevy of talented independent telecom and cloud sales agents dispersed throughout Europe."

JR Cook, SVP of Business Development at Intelisys, said: "This move not only represents an opportunity for our international supplier and sales partners who will be supported out of the UK, but also for our existing ones in the US to expand their presence internationally."

New scheme offered by ITP

THE Institute of Telecommunications Professionals (ITP) has launched a new Corporate Associate Scheme that aims to create networking and collaboration opportunities for the telecoms industry.

Crissi Williams, ITP's Head of Operations, commented: "The ITP has been the voice of the industry for more than a century and Corporate Associates will play a vital role in its structure going forward.

"At present, we offer members networking opportunities, career development through training and qualifications, mentoring and our own apprenticeship scheme. By joining forces with industry partners we hope to strengthen and support the sector for another century.

"We would urge all telecoms businesses who are interested in shaping the ITP and taking advantage of the opportunities this presents to get in touch."

Corporate Associates are being asked to sign up for the scheme and nominate a set of company ambassadors from within their organisation who will advise on the ITP's work.

The free scheme will offer members discounts on accreditations for their workforce,

Crissi Williams

access to the ITP's apprenticeship consultancy, entry to its seminars, discounted CPD packages and invitations to exclusive Executive Club events and C level dinners.
www.theitp.org

ITSPA has welcomed the first five successful applicants to its updated Quality Mark, which was first introduced in 2009 and revamped in 2016 to more closely align with the evolving technological landscape. Voipfone, Hello Telecom, SureVoIP, VoiceHost and Gradwell have signed up to the new standard that's designed to highlight a company's commitment to best practice and delivering a reliable service. Chair of ITSPA Eli Katz (*pictured*) said: "We have made significant changes to the requirements of the original Quality Mark which reflect the maturing nature of the next generation communications industry. These changes have involved consultation with members to ensure the new requirements remain an effective tool for driving up standards as well as being a meaningful accreditation to apply for."

Gamma cuts price

GAMMA'S nationwide build-out programme has enabled the firm to lower Ethernet prices by 'cutting out the middle man' in locations where it has extended its network to key BT exchanges in order to consume Ethernet directly from Openreach.

The build kicked off with the creation of a London Metro Area Network connecting 19 of the busiest exchanges to Gamma's core, with the potential of connecting customers across 38,000 postcodes. James Bushell, Head of Product Lines at Gamma, commented: "Building out to exchanges in this way is really about recognising the importance that Ethernet plays in the delivery of applications to businesses and their increasing need for bandwidth.

"The build-out underpins Gamma's IP voice and MPLS strategies, but the need for cost-effective and high bandwidth Internet access is a key driver behind this programme."

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Big rallying cry

DATACENTREPLUS founder and MD Mashukul Hoque has called on the data centre industry to give small companies a leg-up to fast growth via a flexible 'pay as you grow' model.

"As data centre providers it is important that we do not take the one-size-fits-all approach," he commented.

"Small to medium-sized businesses are increasingly becoming digital and require a helping hand. The data centre community has a role to play in facilitating this journey, and I believe as an industry we have a responsibility to support this."

The Manchester-based company provides colocation for businesses' IT equipment at its Media City premises, working with organisations that want to outsource their power, storage and cooling requirements for their servers and data backup.

Datacentreplus launched its 'pay as you grow' offering earlier this year, giving clients the ability to grow their services and reserve dedicated space, paying for it when needed.

IT providers named in UK's top ranking for fastest growth

FOUR fast growth IT providers have been ranked in the Sunday Times Profit Track 100 list of the 100 most profitable privately owned businesses in the UK.

Annodata features at number 24, IT services provider Claranet is rated 56th, IT consultancy Blue Chip made the listing in 97th position, closely followed by IT security software company Avecto at number 98.

The annual league table, now in its 16th year, ranks Britain's private companies with the fastest growing profits over the last three years.

Cloud and managed services helped to boost Annodata's profitability by 91.28% since 2012. First established as a provider of print services in 1988, Annodata has in recent years diversified its service offering, having successfully moved into providing communications, IT and cloud services.

The acquisition of Keltec in 2014 accelerated Annodata's drive towards delivering managed services, supporting the company's growth ambitions and profitability.

Rod Tonna-Barthet, Annodata's CEO, commented: "We have evolved our strategy over the past few years.

"A number of key additions to our senior management mean that our leadership team has never been stronger, and our expanded service portfolio puts us in a strong position to respond to the often complex needs of our end users.

"Our customers and the business are reaping the rewards of these changes, and I'm delighted that the efforts of the whole team at Annodata have been independently recognised by the Profit Track 100 as being

Rod Tonna-Barthet

Charles Nasser

one of the most profitable businesses in the country."

Claranet, ranked 56th, has increased its profits by an average annual rate of 72% since 2012. The firm also appeared in The Sunday Times' FastTrack series, taking 118th place in The Sunday Times International Track 200 last year.

Charles Nasser, CEO, commented: "Financial strength is core to our value proposition as a managed services provider and is critical if we are to secure the trust of our customers.

"Our ability to adapt to better suit a constantly changing market has enabled the business to improve profitability, securing its financial strength.

"By balancing fiscal responsibility with technological innovation we have been able to grow the business sustainably over our 20 year history.

"The combination of our strong local presence and international reach means that our business has been consistent in its growth both organically and through acquisition within Western Europe."

Avecto was established in 2008 and has grown organically from a two-man team in Manchester to a workforce of over 150 worldwide.

According to Paul Kenyon, co-CEO, the firm's 54.30% profit jump stems from its ambition to identify a niche in the security market and its decision to expand internationally.

"Our in-house research and development team have enabled us to build a product portfolio that ensures we remain at the forefront of innovation in the industry, which has been a massive driver for growth," commented Kenyon.

"With outside investment from JMI Equity we plan to further accelerate the development of our product offering in order to keep organisations across the world secure from the most sophisticated and evolving cyber threats."

In 97th place, Blue Chip recorded a profitability increase of 54.41%.

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Entrepreneur aims for m

Serial entrepreneur Russell Lux thrives on a perpetual craving for winning ever greater sales, so not for nothing is the CEO's launch of TelcoSwitch a matter of significant channel interest.

Russell Lux

Lux is best known in the industry as an 'entrepreneur', but the badge seems insufficient as it sits on the bonnet of a highly tuned selling machine, fuelled almost insatiably by adrenaline. Lux says he became an entrepreneur 'by accident'. But the 'entrepreneur' label doesn't do full justice to his achievements to date nor his renewed drive to disrupt a significant portion of the comms market via a top of the range sales model. "Sales is in my blood, my very DNA," he stated. "Selling gives me an adrenaline kick, and the launch of TelcoSwitch has taken this drive to a new level," he stated.

Lux was bitten by the sales bug when he was at university, selling computers to fellow students. His flair for making money put him on the path to establishing one of the UK's fastest growing IT companies, LuxTech, in January 2001. "I started the company from the spare room of my London flat," he explained. "LuxTech raised its first invoice in July 2001 and clients were gained through word of mouth. We targeted sectors such as solicitors and accounts who could recommend our services to others."

The strategy quickly paid off. In its first year of trading LuxTech generated sales of £80,000, a figure that multiplied to £400,000 in the second year, and a remarkable £1.2 million in year three. By 2009 the firm was populated by 80 staff and registered a turnover of more than £7 million. Based in London and Hertfordshire LuxTech offered an outsourced solution including IT equipment, IT consultancy, telecoms solutions and project management. In 2011 LuxTech was sold to Parachute IT.

Aiming to repeat this masterstroke and intrude on the stomping ground of household industry names, last month Lux ratcheted up his channel ambitions, greased the wheels of the TelcoSwitch rolling campaign convoy and entered hosted comms territory with a laser focus on the channel, a strategy that has already prompted Lux to perform an upward revision of projected new partner numbers this year. At the start of 2016 his aim was to sign up 45 resellers by the dawn of 2017. But a flurry of sign ups has prompted Lux to hike his target to 65. In terms of users of his platform, the goal is 25,000 seats in year one.

TelcoSwitch launched in 2015 as a supplier of unified turnkey hosted telephony services to the channel, offering a product and

arket shake-up

service suite that includes CallSwitch, SimSwitch, NetSwitch and SipSwitch, all designed for large and small businesses. Lux has pinned his hopes on the 'intuitive and simple' nature of TelcoSwitch's platform and the strength of its partner programme. He believes the innovative nature of its offering has the capacity to challenge the established market players by offering users a more rounded and flexible communications platform that fits neatly with the requirements of modern businesses.

"The communications market is vibrant and growing faster than ever," observed Lux. "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 network. But there is a dominant player in the space, so resellers who are focused on selling telephony are invariably going head-to-head with the same platform."

Partner engagement
The partner programme is positioned as a viable 'alternative' and structured around three key pillars – Agency, Managed and Self-Service. Furthermore, Lux is poised to launch a partner portal that will be the main access point into managing the TelcoSwitch relationship. "Here partners will be able to register leads with a deal registration page, download co-branded marketing collateral, view up-to-date pricing and participate in academy training," added Lux.

"Most importantly, partners will access the core platform

Businesses are looking at the cloud to enable them to take more risks, drive change and respond far quicker to broader market conditions

and billing system along with direct links to the Wiki where queries can be answered. TelcoSwitch will support its partners with as little or as much as they need to grow revenues from selling our voice solutions."

The company also offers unlimited telephone support and dedicated training to all resellers, focusing on both the technical and sales elements of its product suit, all of which are turnkey solutions designed for SMEs, enterprises and governments worldwide, offering mobile, connectivity or hosted telephony communications. TelcoSwitch is also working on WebRTC integration for the platform.

"Digital transformation is gaining traction and for the comms channel there is a golden opportunity to deliver UC solutions that help end users deliver their objectives," commented Lux. "Businesses are looking at the cloud to enable them to take more risks and drive change within their organisations,

and respond far quicker to broader market conditions.

"There is a desire for the channel to get involved in cloud solutions, and there is a strong market opportunity , but it also requires a change in mind-set to accommodate the different solutions and new customer expectations," stated Lux. "There is a significant opening for the IT channel to provide sound guidance, support and services to their customers, establishing an effective balance between on-premise and cloud-based services." ■

Just a minute with Russell Lux...

What talent do you wish you had? To play the piano

Role model: Leon Musk: He is restless and constantly looking for ways to transform the way we live. He is a radical who looks at a market and understands how to disrupt it for the greater good

What do you fear the most? Wasps!

Name three ideal dinner guests: David Cameron, Boris Johnson and Jeremy Corbyn. The conversation would be electric!

Describe the TelcoSwitch culture: Chic and geek. We are not only commercially minded, we work collaboratively with our partners
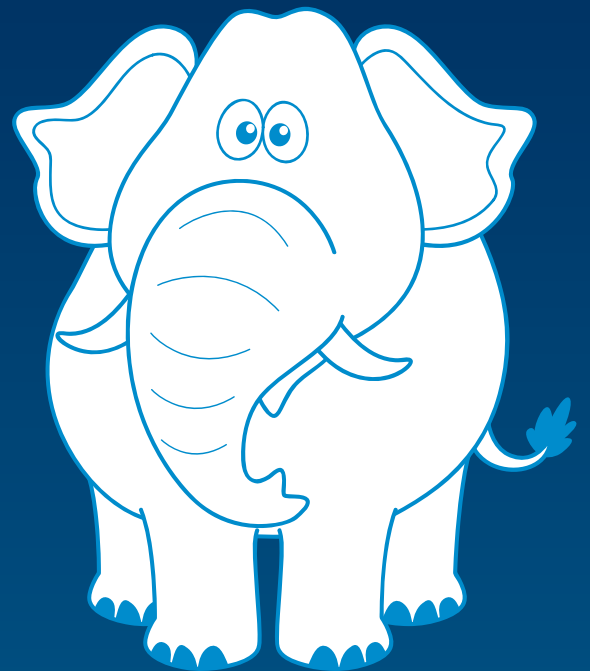
How do you relax when not working? With my family

How would you like to be remembered? As a loving and charitable man

Top tip for resellers: Adopt a consultative approach to sales. It's the only way to add value, understand your customer base and protect your margin

Comms sector review

Philip Carse, industry analyst at Megabuyte.com, reports on the recent trading performances of leading companies operating in the comms space.
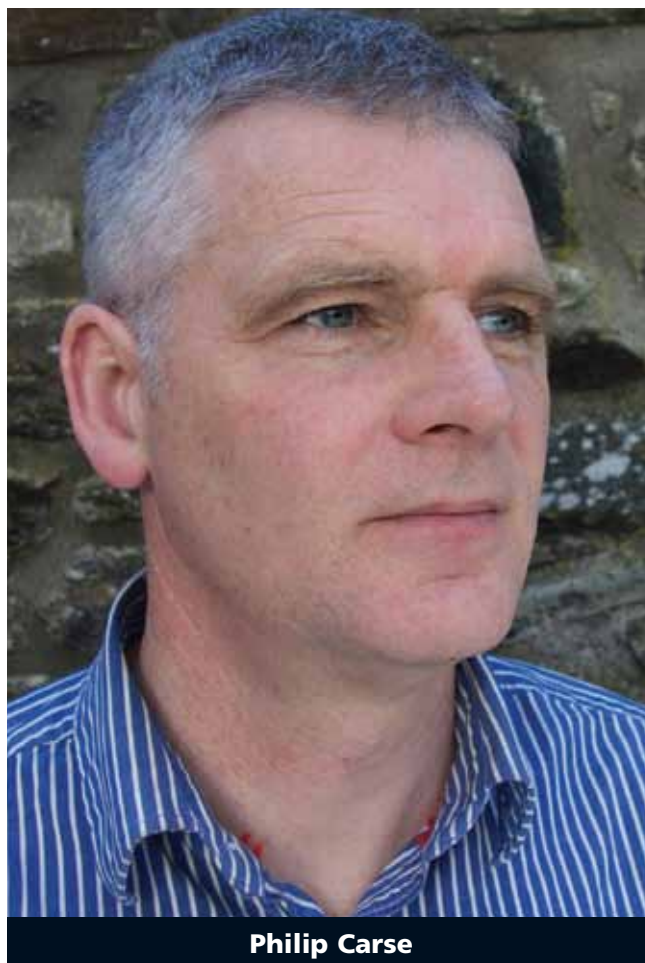

Philip Carse

The key talking points for the UK telecoms and networks scene over the last couple of months have been Maintel's proposed acquisition of Azzurri, a profit warning from Alternative Networks, excellent results from Gamma and some interesting other corporate activity including fibre fund raising (Gigaclear), a new buy and build (Castle Street/Selection Services and C4L), inbound US activity (Callstream), LAN/WAN convergence (Convergence/Networks First) and private equity activity (BGF/Olive).

Maintel has dominated headlines and share price moves with its audacious acquisition of Azzurri for £48.5m/12x EBITDA, part funded by a £24m equity fund raise, which will treble the company's size and lead to significant synergies, albeit with integration challenges. While Maintel is in solid form, reporting 2015 revenues and EBITDA both up 21% (flat organic revenues) at £50.7m and £7.7m respectively aided by the Proximity acquisition, Azzurri continues to lose EBITDA according to Maintel's adjustments, down by 10% to £2.0m in the last six months. The combined group will have revenues and EBITDA of about £143m and £12m. The acquisition

helped Maintel to a one month 23% share price gain.

Other interesting corporate activity includes a new managed services buy and build backed by MXC Capital (Castle Street), which acquired IT managed service provider Selection Services for £34.8m in January and then connectivity and colo provider C4L for £23m/11.5x EBITDA in February. The new business has been renamed CORETX (we expect more acquisitions). In other M&A, network integrator Convergence Group acquired neighbour and IT managed services and network support business Networks First, combining WAN and LAN skills and boosting revenues by a third.

In the private equity world, YFM and Octopus sold their contact centre and hosted voice provider Callstream to J2 Global, a $3bn market cap, highly acquisitive US-listed provider of digital comms services. Meanwhile, the Business Growth Fund invested £10m in mobile service provider turned unified comms player Olive Communications. This enabled accounts to January 2015 to be filed, showing impressive revenue growth (63% to £28.7m), but EBITDA up by much less (+27% to £5.0m) and, for a

second year running, poor operating cash conversion (just £2.0m or 39% of EBITDA). Rural fibre provider Gigaclear raised £24m equity funding, led by Prudential Infracapital and Woodford Investment Management, as part of a £90m funding target this year

Profits warning
In trading updates, Alternative Networks issued a surprise profits warning off the back of lower non-EU mobile roaming tariffs, resulting in a 20% downgrade to EBITDA forecasts for the year to September 2016, and meaning that EBITDA is expected to be down 8% on FY15, at about £20m. The shares are down a third over the last quarter. A subsequent update highlighted 5% growth in Advanced

Solutions recurring revenues, including 10% growth in hosted desktop, and 9% mobile subscriber growth.

In contrast, Gamma reported an above-expectations 2015, with EBITDA up 23% to £28.3m on revenues up 11% to £191.8m, while headline numbers were further boosted by a £5.7m Ladder pricing settlement. Growth came equally from indirect and direct channels, aided by above-market growth in SIP trunks (+54%) and hosted voice (+78%), with new MVNO and MPLS services expected to also contribute to growth in the current year.

Among other public company results, IT managed services provider Redcentric issued a positive year end trading update, noting that full year revenues and EBITDA

to March 2016 will be in line with expectations (up 16% to £109.6m and up 21% to £25.8m respectively according to consensus), aided by last April's Calyx acquisition and an improved revenue mix. The only slight negative was higher than expected net debt, reflecting both increased debtors and success-based capex.

Meanwhile, Adept Telecom announced a slightly better than expected year to March 2016, with EBITDA up 33% to £6.15m (versus 30% growth expectations) on revenues up about 30% (implying about £28.7m), both driven by last May's £7m Centrix deal. The company is proposing a full year dividend up 37% to 6.5p per share.

Among private companies, we would highlight small business-focused comms and utility supplier Verastar (the renamed Universal Utilities) whose accounts to April 2015 showed revenue growth of 23% to £84.9m, mainly due to sales of water in Scotland with estimated organic growth of 9%. However, with estimated gross margins of just 5% on water, EBITDA rose a lower 5.5% to £30.0m. Owner-managed ISP Zen Internet showed improving trends, with revenue growth of 7.1% to £54.2m up on recent growth rates, while EBITDA jumped 53% to £5.7m, helped by supplier renegotiations and staff cuts. However, cash conversion remained poor. ∎

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Elevate heightens billing

Not surprisingly, billing platform pioneers have gone in precisely the direction of the industry, led by the cloud, big data and security, and, like Strategic Imperatives, they have themselves become agents of change.

Tim Sayer (left) and Wail Sabbagh

The launch of Elevate early last year was a notable victory for Strategic Imperatives. It concluded the development of a comprehensive rating and billing engine and created a platform for a number of complementary services to be introduced this year that will, says Wail Sabbagh, Managing Director, take the company to the next level. "Firstly, we plan to introduce intelligent fraud detection," he said. "Elevate already supports the standard threshold/alerting approach but this is no longer sufficient to deal with the sophisticated levels of fraud experienced by the channel. We have worked with a number of technologies over the last year as part of our R&D drive, in particular Amazon Web Services (AWS) Red Shift which has shown great promise. Our task now is to productise and refine what is an industry first."

Sabbagh has also set his sights on creating a unified billing and provisioning implementation that manages the full customer lifecycle from provision to bill across multiple tier 1 networks. "We are moving closer to achieving our ambition," he stated. "The next step is to further integrate Elevate with CPconnect, our SI service that provides a unified interface to multiple network providers such as Openreach, BT Wholesale, TalkTalk and Vodafone. This year we plan to add support for zero touch TalkTalk billing integration in addition to the WLR3 capability we made available last year."

The running message is that billing is no longer regarded as a product, it's a strategic service that must be delivered against strict SLAs. With this in mind Strategic Imperatives set about re-writing the billing landscape. "We asked our customers one question, 'What would a perfect billing system look like?'," said Sabbagh. "We took their answers and our experience of turning complex requirements into intuitive solutions and launched a multi-million pound project to design and develop a system from the ground up. We threw out the rulebook and created Elevate."

Sabbagh defines his vision of billing as The Power of Now, a term that describes a key driver for Elevate which he believes will change how communication providers view and use their billing platform. "The Power of Now is all about real-time," he said. "Elevate works in real-time, responding instantly to changes in customer and pricing data, immediately re-calculating and giving clients a constant oversight of their business performance, with all the data they need at their fingertips. Elevate's real-time approach is reflected in the visually rich and dynamic dashboards created by users from a library of widgets and reporting tools."

Core proposition
At the heart of Strategic Imperatives' proposition are SaaS-based solutions with no on-premise requirements, best of breed integration using published APIs, an intuitive user experience and no contractual tie in. "We are also committed to equivalence and bringing solution parity to the market," stated Sabbagh.

"Our pay-as-you-use pricing and start-up packages level the playing field for resellers regardless of their size. We provide the same solutions and service wrap to channel giants such as TalkTalk, Vodafone, Daisy, Gamma and Plusnet as we do to the smallest reseller, enabling a provisioning and billing level playing field and ensuring minimal technological barriers as resellers build their businesses."

Another step change in the channel's expectations of a billing system is reflected in the shift in attitude towards technology, business support systems, processes and propositions, pointed out Sabbagh. "Best of breed integration, automation, SaaS and usability are now fundamental requirements that cannot be easily retrofitted to existing systems," he observed.

"We have also gained a far better understanding of the nature of a true cloud proposition. Gone are the days when a cloud offering simply meant hosting an application remotely. Communication providers are now asking about dynamic scaling, disaster recovery and security, all difficult questions to answer when a product is based on legacy technology."

Integration has also become a key driver for most businesses, regardless of size, as they seek to build processes based on best of breed platforms rather than a 'one size fits all' solution, pointed out Tim Sayer, Head of Business Development. "Nearly every business we speak to is asking about the availability of our APIs as they seek to integrate billing with CRM, order management, accounts/ledger, collection and other systems," he said.

g expectations

Sayer also noted that high profile security breaches inside and outside of the comms sector reminded everyone, again, about the importance of security in all manner of software systems. "One of the inherent benefits of AWS is an enterprise level of security that's out of reach for most software developers and the majority of communication providers," added Sayer. "But it's an integral part of what we deliver to our customers because of the way we have leveraged the AWS architecture. Closely linked to this is the impact of fraudulent usage on many communication providers, so we, and other vendors, have provided a suite of tools to allow suspect activity to be monitored, alerts raised and action taken."

Enterprise security
Using Amazon's enterprise cloud infrastructure has enabled Elevate to offer high levels of security with the introduction of automated vulnerability scanning, two factor authentication and financial grade encryption. Big data is another key trend that will influence the billing market, noted Sabbagh.

"Hats off to our colleagues at Union Street who have used big data principles to introduce the recent Benchmarking service," he commented. "We have big plans in this area, fraud detection and analytics in particular. The AWS infrastructure enables Elevate to utilise massive data warehouse engines such as Amazon Red Shift as part of our proposition to offer a big data service that would otherwise be financially out of reach of all but the largest network operators."

Billing is no longer a product, it's a strategic service that must be delivered against strict SLAs

Such propositions, along with connectivity, networking, cloud services, complex bundling and complementary services must be at the heart of a modern billing system, not just an add-on to a bygone era, believes Sabbagh. "The future of billing systems is driven by their unstoppable evolution from standalone products to being an integral part of a fully integrated open service platform utilising best of breed CRM, billing and provisioning services, based on agreed industry standards," he added. "We also see a market for a library of complementary micro services such as payment management, banking integration and credit scoring, all flourishing as part of an open integration architecture."

We have seen that Strategic Imperatives' go to market strategy is defined by the cloud, big data, security and the evolution of the channel. Here's another reason why. "Cloud is key for true SaaS," said Sabbagh. "In developing Elevate we utilised AWS, the same infrastructure that supports many of the world's Fortune 500 organisations. Our

approach eliminates the need for complex infrastructure and will seamlessly grow with our customers' business.

"In terms of billing systems, our biggest opportunity lies with those resellers who, after reviewing their IT stack, have come to realise that the future lies with SaaS-based, integration led and open billing platforms. The channel has always recognised that it operates in a world where it must adapt to survive, and the same is true of billing systems.

"When we introduced Elevate our intention was to transform the billing market. Elevate has pioneered the introduction of auto-scaling which instantly delivers greater capability and capacity on-demand. We call this approach 'elastic magic' because users never experience unpredictability or reduced performance when their processes ramp up demand, and it runs so smoothly that it feels like magic."

Another topic on which Strategic Imperatives exerts a telling influence is focused on the development and elevation of industry standards. "We are working with industry bodies to establish and maintain standards for the benefit of everyone," said Sayer. "We've become advocates for the channel, engaging in collaborative discussion and forum participation around regulation, processes and technology. We're well regarded as industry experts by our clients and the industry regulators who call upon our expertise to validate proposed changes to the channel ecosystem." ∎
Billing in focus, pages 40 & 46

Marston's sets the bar

The telecommunications arm of pub retailing business and brewer Marston's PLC is gearing up for channel expansion following a period of sustained and significant growth, according to Head of Telecoms Rob Derbyshire.

Rob Derbyshire

Last year, Marston's Telecoms broke through 25 per cent growth, accelerating away from the 18 per cent growth it recorded a year earlier. "2016 is more about consolidation, so we expect low double digit growth before targeting another 25 to 30 per cent in financial year 2017/2018," explained Derbyshire.

The appeal of Marston's Telecoms' proposition to the channel is undeniable, and Derbyshire plans to leverage the market gains already made to the advantage of a growing number of resellers. "We're aiming to be far more established within the channel community," he stated. "We have a wealth of expertise in Marston's that we leverage to support of our partners."

Marston's Telecoms was formed in 2008 by Mike McMinn, Group IT Director at Marston's PLC, to generate savings for the group through purchasing comms services on a wholesale basis. A big turning point for Marston's Telecoms was its transformation into a true wholesale provider of comms services. "What we haven't done well to date is properly articulate our offer to prospective partners," added Derbyshire. "This is why we're actively engaging with the channel and focusing on partner recruitment. Resellers seem to gravitate towards our personal experience in rolling out larger solutions. Most are looking to develop their proposition not only in SMB but also moving into larger corporate and flagship accounts."

According to Derbyshire, The deployment of Marston's Telecoms own network gave it a competitive edge in the retail space. "Our current focus is on our second core network upgrade in 20 months," he explained. "This is necessary due to the bandwidth required by customers and all of the interconnects we need with other carriers to offer an agnostic service. For the size of our business, this is a significant investment. We'll have a 50 gigabit core network in London delivered on state of the art chassis routers. This should provide our resellers with the reassurance that Marston's Telecoms is here to stay."

Buying power

From a telecoms perspective, leveraging its PLC ownership has allowed Marston's to buy well from suppliers and in turn pass this benefit on to its channel partners. "We are also well positioned in that we understand first-hand what end users want because that is how we started," added Derbyshire. "So when it comes to assisting channel partners in delivering the right solution for larger bids we are able to provide relevant expertise."

Hosted VoIP and connectivity are the key growth products, although that's tempered by declining costs in connectivity, noted Derbyshire. "While customers are buying greater volumes of bandwidth it's still a race to the bottom," he stated. "We need to continue to innovate and drive down costs to remain competitive. Moving into 2016/17 we are developing software to provide partners with a greater depth of analytics so they can better manage their business."

The expectation of resellers from a support perspective has been a significant learning curve, pointed out Derbyshire. "We were originally geared up to support our parent company, a large PLC, and we've had to change our processes and add people to be able to support resellers in the way we want to," he explained. "Customer support is important to us so it is something we are constantly evaluating.

"Our growth will come from supporting a diverse and innovative reseller channel, and their growth will lead to ours. We will look for new ways to assist their growth and we won't be afraid to explore new avenues. The partnerships we develop have far greater substance than simply passing on a telecoms commodity. Our success is dependent on our partners' success so they really are the Marston's focus."

To bolster its support for partners Marston's Telecom is investing in more tools that will enable resellers to own the whole lifecycle of a product without needing to refer to the company. "This is still very much a work in progress, but we recognise it is key to growth in the channel," added Derbyshire. "That, and leveraging the benefits of SDN via these sorts of tools can offer partners a much more flexible solution."

The challenge of positioning Marston's Telecoms against larger market alternatives is also the company's big opportunity to articulate its point of difference, believes Derbyshire. "Financial strength, continuous investment, using what we sell and having a big FTSE 250 using our services are key reasons for resellers to partner with us," he added. "This is an exciting time for the channel. There's tremendous noise around hosted VoIP and coupled with greater connectivity demands this lends itself to a persuasive sell." ∎

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Hare on course for mass

Anyone seeking a foretaste of how rural communities will be connected in the future need look no further than the activities and ambitions of pure fibre network builder Gigaclear, according to Chief Executive Matthew Hare.

Matthew Hare

Hare is on a mission to liberate rural areas from inefficient broadband. He started Gigaclear from scratch in December 2010 with a business model directed at building and operating ultrafast, pure Fibre-To-The-Premises (FTTP) broadband networks in rural communities where the existing fixed network infrastructure under performs. "The aim is to give these communities faster and more reliable broadband than is available anywhere else in the UK," he said. "Living in a rural area doesn't mean you have to tolerate bad broadband. Using FTTP technology, properties in rural parts of the UK can experience speeds of up to 1Gbps, up to 33 times faster than the UK average. Once built, the future proof network can keep up with the increasing demand for better, faster broadband to meet the connection needs of a modern, digital society."

Prior to setting up Gigaclear, Hare was founder and CEO of Community Internet Group and ts.com, both privately owned providers of Internet and data services in the UK. He is a Director and Council Member of the Internet Service Providers Association (ISPA) and has also been involved in numerous network, wireless, data and telephony businesses such as Vodafone, Millicom, Microtel (Orange UK) and Liberty Communications.

When working for the Kinnevik Group in the 1990s he persuaded the UK Government to allocate 168Mhz of spectrum for fixed wireless access for Liberty Communications, a triumph that Hare rates as one of his biggest achievements to date. Looking ahead, he expects Gigaclear to become the largest rural FTTP network operator in the UK.

"We'll get there by doing more of what we are already doing, but better, cheaper and faster," stated Hare. "From a commercial perspective, there are over one and a half million homes and businesses in Britain that could benefit from our services and we want to reach those people as quickly as possible. In 2016, Gigaclear plans to build its network to at least 40,000 additional properties, so there's plenty of opportunity for further growth."

On target

In 2015, Gigaclear had a headcount of 63 and the firm's turnover was £1.4 million with a gross profit of £0.6m. The company successfully reached its target of delivering pure fibre broadband to 15,000 properties last year. Its network serves individual households, small and medium businesses (including schools, hotels, business parks, factories, farms and offices) and the occasional enterprise.

The venture kicked off in earnest in May 2011 when Gigaclear bought Rutland Telecom and built its first fibre network in Hambleton, a small village with a population of 140 people, opening for service in October of that year. "Once we had demonstrated what was possible Gigaclear was ready for take-off," stated Hare.

To date, Gigaclear has built 60 rural fibre networks and has a strong pipeline with a further 25 in construction. Over 20,000 properties in rural parts of Oxfordshire, Essex, Northamptonshire, Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Kent, Cambridgeshire, Leicestershire, Hertfordshire and Gloucestershire are live as a result, with 10,000 more already in construction.

Gigaclear has secured significant investment to build its network. Initially this was via 102 private individuals through the Government's Enterprise Investment Scheme, but in

rural fibre build

2014 Woodford Investment Management became Gigaclear's first major institutional investor, followed by Prudential Infracapital last year. In January this year, Gigaclear secured an £18 million debt facility from the European Investment Bank (IEB). The loan is the largest one of its kind awarded to a UK company. "We're a capital intensive business so this loan was an important next step in our expansion strategy," commented Hare.

"Moving from a company that has private investors to one with funding from institutional investors has made a big difference to the business. It has accelerated our rate of growth. The strong financial support of our shareholders lets us get on with the job of delivering future-proof broadband without delay. Furthermore, securing BDUK contracts expands our growth opportunities."

Last month Gigaclear announced a £24 million new equity investment that will accelerate the build of its FTTP network. Building on these commercial investments, in 2015 Gigaclear secured contracts to deliver superfast broadband to customers as part of the Government subsidised BDUK programme to bring broadband of at least 24Mbps to 95 per cent of the UK. Gigaclear has won three substantial BDUK contracts in Gloucestershire, Berkshire and Essex.

The company is also developing its wholesale channel with service providers selling through the Fluidata aggregation platform and through direct connections at Telehouse

Once we had demonstrated what was possible Gigaclear was ready for take-off

East and Equinix LD4. "The majority of our customers are currently contracted directly with Gigaclear for service," said Hare. "Over the next few years we expect a substantial shift to our wholesale partners."

A recent consultation from the Department of Culture, Media and Sport, *National Broadband Scheme: Market Engagement on Procurement Approach*, opens up a range of different potential models that can be used to deliver better broadband in the UK, Hare believes. "We are interested in seeing the impact of the plan to give priority to ISPs offering open access networks," he commented. "Combined with breaking down procurement into smaller lots, we expect to see a significant increase in the number of companies bidding for projects to serve the 'final 10 per cent'."

Hare's priority is to 'build, build, build!', and he rates the steady increase in demand for reliable, high quality bandwidth as Gigaclear's biggest opportunity. But his greatest challenge is acceleration. "To build more ultrafast FTTP networks we need to greatly expand our range of sub-contractors while maintaining the quality of built infrastructure," he said.

Hare has worked in the communications industry since 1984 and still exudes a passion for the transformative power of technology. "Telecoms in particular is an enabler for change and innovation," he enthused. "And Gigaclear is transforming how rural communities connect with the world. We want these communities to be better connected forever, so we are delivering a reliable ultrafast broadband network of the future, designed for the modern digital society. We are trustworthy, secure and here for the long run." ∎

Just a minute with Matthew Hare...

What talent do you wish you had? To have an excellent singing voice and the natural rhythm to go with it

Role model: Winston Churchill – he was willing to swim against the tide

Tell us something about yourself we don't know: We breed Flatcoated Retrievers

Name three ideal dinner guests: Winston Churchill, my role model; Howard Hughes who was brilliantly mad; and Akio Morita, co-founder of Sony

If you weren't in comms what would you be doing? Software

How would you like to be remembered? Great husband, father and friend, and transformed lives through communications

What could you not do without in your job? Internet access

Top tip for resellers: Be super-clear to yourself and your company what your value add is for customers

Guided by self-belief

Here follows a lesson in advanced determination, by Shahram Baherzadeh, Managing Director at Essex-based Loop Voice & Data.

Shahram Baherzadeh

When starting out, most would-be business owners are likely to give up if faced with obstacles the size of mountains. But Bagherzadeh's story is one of robust persistence, so much so that no barrier proved insurmountable. Bagherzadeh started his company in 2000 with no sales experience, no telecoms experience, zero finance knowhow, no management experience and the bank wouldn't lend him any money. Having found a home in comms after leaving the hospitality industry he worked from a box room for three years. "I realised there was great potential in telecoms and started Wireless Telecommunications as a sole trader," he said. "I knew that I could offer better customer service. In 2003 Wireless Telecommunications became a limited company and in 2009 we adopted Loop Voice & Data as a trading name."

Bagherzadeh arrived in the UK in 1987 and studied English as a foreign language at Mid-Warwickshire College. He then passed a BETC first diploma in 1990 and worked in a number of restaurants around the UK. "My previous experience in hospitality ingrained a culture of customer service and hard work," he added. "Our biggest opportunity is customer service which is lacking in this market. But what we deliver is high."

His decision to enter the comms industry went against the advice of close friends who thought he had 'lost his marbles'. "Everyone I knew thought I had gone mad and tried to convince me otherwise," noted Bagherzadeh. "The journey has been painful, but I've proven that hard work and belief in yourself, no matter what, will pay off. Nobody can stop learning, either about work or in life, because every day there is something new."

Growth curve

Wireless Telecommunications' turnover for the first three years was circa £12k per annum. A move to bigger offices and the addition of an admin role helped to push revenues up to £30k. "I then employed one sales person and turnover increased to £155k," said Bagherzadeh. "By 2006 our turnover grew to £460k with three employees. Three years later we moved to a larger office and now have nine staff with revenues of £1.4 million and over 600 clients. The 10 year plan is to grow our indirect agents and to position Loop Voice & Data as the main telecoms company in Essex."

Bagherzadeh's work experience in hospitality is paying dividends, with Loop Voice & Data's customer churn registering at less than 1.6 per cent per annum. "We continually ask our clients about their needs and requirements to make sure we understand them and deliver what they need," he added. "I'm a great believer in 'people buy from people', and if your clients believe in you and trust you, then it is much easier to introduce them to new technology. Our priorities are to keep clients happy, stay abreast of the market and increase turnover. The challenge is maintaining high margins in the process."

Bagherzadeh's strict policy of product and service revision ensures the company is aligned with the evolving requirements of its target customers. This strategy has also defined a strong portfolio underpinned by relationships with key partners such as Pragma (LG), Trust (Mitel), TalkTalk Business, Gamma, Vodafone, Openreach, BT Wholesale and Virtual1. "A big change of direction for the company was moving from traditional telephony to the world of VoIP," noted Bagherzadeh. "I didn't want to stay behind technology advancements as customer demand increased."

The imperative to keep up with the pace of change and maximise margins is one of the reasons behind a narrowing of Bagherzadeh's product range in 2009. "We began to refocus and be known for what we specialised in," he explained.

"The adoption of SIP and cloud telephony is growing at a fast rate due to lower data connectivity prices and greater regional availability. More of our clients are asking about SIP and hosted services, so we always review our products every three years to stay aligned with these market trends. End users are getting more and more clever, playing resellers against each other to get the best deals. VARs therefore need to develop what they are good at and be known for their specialisms." ∎

Just a minute with Shahram Bagherzadeh

Role model: My brother. He built his business from zero, has not forgotten who he is and helps anyone he knows with no financial interest

What talent do you wish you had? To play classic guitar

How would you like to be remembered? On a bad day I'm happy, on a good day very happy

Your greatest strength and what could you improve on? I'm positive, but my weakness is trusting people immediately

Name one thing you could not do without in your job: Belief in what I'm doing

Something you have overcome: Shyness

Lesson learnt? I would have only sold services, not hardware

Tell us something about yourself we don't know: I was a Chinese Kung Fu Association member and I taught Wing Chun Kung Fu for over 12 years in the UK

If you weren't in comms what would you be doing? Teaching martial arts

Empowered by energy

Market Harborough-based Welcomm has completed the latest phase of product diversification having become a gas and electricity supplier in partnership with Fidelity Energy, a move that's powered up Welcomm's margin making engine.

As an industry long timer Welcomm has developed long-term relationships with customers, enabling the company to leverage its trusted advisor status to good effect by adding gas and electricity services to its portfolio following a link-up with Fidelity Energy. Now in its 27th year, Welcomm has grown from being the first mobile retailer in the midlands to the large communications specialist it is today, offering a complete suite of communications solutions across mobile, fixed line, telephony, hosted and managed services.

Welcomm's drive for growth was acknowledged earlier this year by the London Stock Exchange in its landmark annual '1,000 companies to Inspire Britain' report which identifies the UK's most exciting and dynamic small and medium-sized enterprises. "Being in business for as long as we have is rare in this industry," said Chairman Chris Stanton. "This longevity already positions us over and above competitors by giving us the foundations to grow at a steady, yet progressive pace."

The company has forged close, long-term partnerships with the likes of O2, Avaya and Gamma. Indeed, Welcomm's relationship with the latter was further cemented in early 2015 when it was granted Platinum Partner status. "We have now become one of Gamma's biggest Horizon and Hosted Voice resellers, as well as having completed their largest converged private network deal to date," added Stanton.

The Welcomm team established a close working relationship with John Haw, who ran the sales team at Gamma for eight years. When he moved into his new role as Managing Director at Fidelity Energy, it was the catalyst for the company's move into the supply of energy services. "The simplicity of the energy business model and the added value we believe it brings in giving customers value for money complements our business perfectly and strengthens our relationship with our customers," said Stanton.

"It has been relatively easy to get started as we used the resource we already had in house to promote the service and to get bills in for review. This uncovered a number of

Chris Stanton

The simplicity of the energy business model complements our business perfectly

opportunities and revealed any potential obstacles, so it was a great learning curve. During this brief period of testing we also got an understanding of the internal processes of Fidelity.

Key opportunity

"With the concept proven we quickly brought on board an Energy Manager as we knew beyond doubt that this was a fantastic opportunity and needed complete focus and passion to deliver the results from our receptive customers. Now we have this in place, things are moving at a pace and Fidelity has the flexibility to

keep supporting us with our requirements and strengthen the Welcomm Energy brand."

Welcomm is initially extending the service to its existing base to ensure that its customers are the first to benefit from a saving of between 10-50 per cent on their current energy rates. The team is then planning to contact new companies in key target sectors that are high energy users. Setting up the energy division has been relatively straightforward and the processes are simple to implement according to Welcomm's new Energy Manager, Nicola Bingley.

"We are ensuring that customers are able to seamlessly switch their energy billing to take advantage of the great savings available," she commented. "Once we have a copy of the customer's bill and their authority to proceed, we work in conjunction with Fidelity to source the best energy rates in the market. We summarise these findings in a proposal to highlight the top three and our recommendation, and then the contracts are agreed and signed. The fact that they will have one point of contact for their mobile, unified, comms and energy needs is being viewed as a bonus.

"Most customers that we have spoken with to date are receptive as we can save them time as well as money by sourcing and securing better energy rates for their business. In addition, Welcome Energy will proactively account manage the service, alerting customers when their contract is due to end to prevent them slipping back on to high out-of-contract-run on rates."

Many customers haven't reviewed their energy suppliers for some considerable time, therefore they are typically paying 40 per cent more than the current low rates Welcomm Energy will be able to secure for them, according to Bingley. "Even if our customers are currently tied into an energy contract, Welcomm Energy can future sign them at the current low rates for up to five years in advance," she said. "We see this as a huge opportunity for our customers to save money and to benefit from our account management." ∎

Platform of the future

As long as businesses crave the benefits of slick process integration, flexibility, useful data and insightful analytics, the central role of billing platforms is assured, according to Vincent Disneur, Head of Sales and Marketing at Union Street Technologies.

Vincent Disneur

For most resellers, the billing platform is the core revenue generating software in the business. And, in the main, it's the only software purpose-built for use by resellers, pointed out Disneur. Moreover, billing platforms have evolved to a point where they now reflect the wider functions of an organisation. "It's logical therefore that the integration of business support systems (BSS) and operations support systems (OSS) should be structured around the billing platform," noted Disneur. "

Union Street is improving its API functionality for aBILLity to make it easier to integrate with third party back-end systems. "Integration between various software packages is becoming much tighter and, if managed correctly, can deliver an almost completely integrated back office solution," added Disneur. "By integrating these systems, multiple benefits can be achieved such as a single point for data entry, reduced errors, up to date and synchronised data across all applications, and a reduced workload for administrative staff."

The move from on-premise solutions towards cloud hosted and web-based platforms is also a big industry trend and Union Street has invested significant resources into developing its cloud proposition. "aBILLity Cloud, a cloud hosted version of our aBILLity platform, is now used by almost 50 per cent of our partner base," explained Disneur. "With the majority of new partners choosing aBILLity Cloud, and many more of our existing partners switching over each month, we fully expect this percentage to increase."

Over 450 reseller partners use the aBILLity platform to manage their billing, provisioning and network service operations. Not surprisingly, product development around solutions such as aBILLity Cloud is a top priority. "This does of course require a big investment," stated Disneur. "Over the course of 2015, Union Street invested over £1,100,000 into R&D, our biggest annual investment to date. This year we aim to exceed that figure. Much of our recent product development has focused on transitioning our aBILLity product set from what was predominantly an on-premise solution to a cloud SaaS model, developing the aBILLity Cloud platform in a way that offers elasticity in resources, is scalable, repeatable and highly secure.

Cloud first

"We're developing new products and services that can be leveraged around our cloud hosted proposition. As a result, approximately 80 per cent of new partners are going straight onto our cloud platform. To manage the onward development of our cloud infrastructure we recently appointed David McGrath as Head of Cloud. He possesses wide ranging, first-hand experience of designing cloud environments and of the reseller business model."

Like all software applications, billing solutions will increasingly be available in the cloud on a SaaS model with all the usual benefits such as disaster recovery, accessibility, reduced cost of infrastructure and maintenance etc. "Perhaps one of the biggest advantages of cloud is its scalability," added Disneur. "The ability to scale up elasticity in resources, storage and processing power at times of peak demand and then decrease them again lends itself well to billing environments."

Another driver for change is the growing popularity of next generation network services such as SIP and Ethernet. Providing the tools to manage and provision these services effectively is a key area of development for Union Street and the firm is busy working on new ways to streamline the processes for quoting, ordering and provisioning these types of services.

Another important development project is nearing the launch phase, a new web client interface for aBILLity. Designed for use in combination with aBILLity Cloud, the web client provides easy access to much of the most popular functionality the platform has to offer on any device with a web browser. The web client also works with on-premise versions of aBILLity.

"Feedback on the web client has been positive," added Disneur. "It provides a slick user experience due to an enhanced user interface that dynamically scales to fit whichever device it's being viewed on. For resellers that use our Bureau Billing Service we have tailored the available functionality to create a streamlined, uncluttered user experience."

Union Street has also launched Benchmarking, a business intelligence service that enables its reseller partners to compare their business performance against industry averages derived from a large anonymised sample of its partner base. "We are encouraging our partners to opt into this new service which is offered free of charge," said Disneur. "The consolidated data harvested will provide a strong industry benchmark average, and a valuable indication of business performance for resellers against their peers. As Benchmarking gains traction it will help our partners to spot trends in sales of certain services, enabling them to focus their activities on those areas accordingly." ■

Billing in focus – page 46

Some things are worth waiting for

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Project shows the indust

Having completed a number of Gigabit City projects the message to the industry from CityFibre is that whatever the connectivity challenge where viable, 'we aim to build', and Aberdeen was no exception.

Rob Hamlin

CityFibre's Gigabit City project is well advanced, bringing pure fibre infrastructures to entire communities. Its intention is to show that anything is possible, again and again, by leveraging its 'well-planned city approach' to building modern networks and overcoming all challenges that cross its path. The sheer agility of what CityFibre has done in Aberdeen is one example of how it has shifted the planning process to a new level. Moreover, CityFibre's work with cloud and application hosting firm Brightsolid is emblematic of its slick city-by-city approach to becoming a credible national infrastructure network alternative.

Brightsolid is the technology arm of DC Thomson & Company and has served the energy sector for 20 years. The firm is based in Dundee Technology Park and operates purpose built tier III data centre facilities in Dundee, Edinburgh and Aberdeen. The Aberdeen site, located west of the city, was primarily designed to serve the oil and gas industry, one of the most data intensive industries and a sector that is under financial pressure given falling oil prices. The facility helps to reduce the cost and risk of end user IT requirements by bringing offshore operations onshore wherever possible.

"After our first data centre was built in Dundee we saw significant adoption across energy, financial services and public sector organisations with the main concern being security," said Richard Higgs, CEO at Brightsolid. "With a capacity of 200 racks Dundee soon started to hit capacity. Many of our Aberdeen-based oil and gas customers at that time were served by the Dundee site, and after listening to more than 70 energy organisations we identified a requirement for a carrier neutral facility in Aberdeen. With the help of our parent company we decided to make a £5 million investment to transform the connectivity experience for the area. We also wanted to offer a rich choice of connectivity provider, including satellite provision."

The Aberdeen facility holds over 400 racks and is designed with the latest cooling technology called Ecofris, a system that enables Brightsolid to pass power savings on to customers. Furthermore, the company was the first Microsoft cloud OS partner in Scotland certified for Azure Hybrid Cloud, and one of a handful in Europe. Not surprisingly, CityFibre's Aberdeen project did not go unnoticed. "When we saw that CityFibre was bringing a modern fibre network to Aberdeen to create a Gigabit City it made sense to bring that connectivity into the Brightsolid data centre," added Higgs.

Vital connections

"The CityFibre links in and around Aberdeen are a vital contribution to our core network which gets our customers anywhere in the UK in under 20 milliseconds. The 100 per cent resilient path from CityFibre is also a selling point. Connectivity is the backbone of what we provide and it's vital that our core network surpasses the expectations of our customers."

The Brightsolid data centre would have been at some point within close reach of the CityFibre network, but the network itself was not built when conversations with Brightsolid began. As with any network build there comes a time when the talking stops and something must happen, the quicker the better. After CityFibre planners visited the site to assess the connectivity requirements the decision to invest in a two month programme of work to connect the site was made within one hour. Three months later just over three kilometres of network had been built and connected, including a tricky crossing of the A96 and close collaboration with Scottish Gas Networks.

It goes without saying that Brightsolid's reputation for being flexible sometimes depends on its partners acting quickly, and CityFibre's no-nonsense approach dovetailed with Brightsolid's *modus operandi*. "As a technology company we must be agile, and CityFibre shares the same 'if it makes sense, let's just get it done' attitude," added Higgs. "We value this approach immensely.

try at its best

CityFibre's decision to invest in a programme of work to connect the site was made quickly. From start to finish it took 12 weeks to get us connected to a brand new network."

The obstacle confronting many technological projects is an inability on the part of stakeholders to work together effectively, often made worse by a stubborn dismissal of new ways of doing things that can release whole regions from a past blighted by poor connectivity. According to CityFibre, it's all about great planning and forming partnerships such as its link-up with Scottish ISP IFB, CityFibre's anchor partner in Aberdeen.

"Our 'well-planned city approach' is the building block of every Gigabit City build," commented Rob Hamlin, Commercial Director at CityFibre. "We start the process by looking at the location of business and retail areas, local authority sites, data centres, exchange buildings and mobile sites etc to ensure the built network passes as close as possible to areas of anticipated future demand. We also run early demand aggregation campaigns to establish exactly where other demand clusters are."

This approach often exposes clusters of businesses that are not adequately served, or in some cases frustrated, by the quality of existing connectivity options or service delivery. "A planned build is sometimes split into a number of phases in order to achieve the optimum reach or to prioritise an anchor tenant," added Hamlin. "Even if an area is not included as part

Connectivity is the backbone of what we provide and it's vital that our core network surpasses the expectations of our customers

of the early phases there is always an opportunity for future expansion." Once a city-wide deployment begins, the physical installation of the cables and connection of a city's key sites proceeds rapidly. If network is already in place due to an acquisition for example, CityFibre will carry out full checks and undertake any improvement work to ensure it is robust enough to pin its reputation on and offer guaranteed SLAs.

Forward planning
As with all of its cities, CityFibre also considers ongoing expansion opportunities and plans ahead accordingly. "Ultimately, a well planned network can function as a backbone for deployment of fibre to individual homes as well as businesses, providing residential access to true choice and ever-richer forms of digital services and entertainment," commented Hamlin.

CityFibre has evolved what amounts to a technical edge

on the ground during the assessment process, where obstacles are looked at and weighed up from a different perspective – not as found. "Although Brightsolid's particular network build was relatively simple with just a few hurdles to overcome, including the need to cross the A96 and time spent working in the trenches with the Scottish Gas Networks team, it's not always so easy," stated Hamlin. "When we hit challenges during a network build we look for solutions and make the most of our agility. That's what we did for Brightsolid, using an entirely different route into the building from all other providers, and getting it installed before it was open for business."

South of the Scottish border, CityFibre also opened a new digital front in the connected future of Leeds and Bradford last month, both now Gigabit Cities with ultra-fast Internet services available through CityFibre's launch partners Exa Networks and Diva Telecom. Other initiatives aren't far behind. After all, why should past forces in the market be allowed to determine what we may experience of the future? This question is best answered through agile partnerships, believes Hamlin.

"The way in which a provider works is vital in our industry, whether that's at the infrastructure, data centre or pure connectivity provisioning level," he said. "As well as ticking all of the boxes in terms of technical, product and solutions prowess, it is crucial to be innovative, easy to do business with and be flexible enough to meet the customers' modern day connectivity requirements." ∎

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Split into three sessions, the event will comprise a morning thought leadership conference to help delegates get an understanding of the new Voice & Data landscape; an afternoon 'managed meetings' session where resellers can meet new supplier partners; and last but by no means least, a fun evening networking dinner.

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Margin in Voice & Data delegates must be directors of reseller business with a turnover below £3m

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.

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.

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.

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RAMI HOUBBY, NFON.

KNIGHT CORPORATE FINANCE

With around 70 transactions under our belt, we have observed how the channel has evolved. At MiVaD we will look at the key changes 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.

ADAM ZOLDAN – KNIGHT CF.

PROVU

Established in 1999, ProVu was one of the first distributors to offer provisioning for IP phones . We offer a comprehensive range of wrap-around services which are unique to the channel. Through our ProSys reseller portal, our customers can take control of their orders both pre and post deployment.

DARREN GARLAND – PROVU.

NIMANS NETWORK SERVICES

At Margin in Voice and Data, the Nimans' Network Services team will be taking resellers on a journey of discovery, from traditional communications into more recurring revenue-based technologies. M2M (Machine to Machine) and IoT (The Internet of Things) and the Cloud will be high on the agenda

MARK CURTIS-WOOD,
NIMANS NETWORK SERVICES.

MARSTON'S TELECOM

We look forward to being able to show partners our full range of products and the flexibility of the services that we can provide. We'll also be taking the opportunity to demonstrate why resellers should partner with Marston's Telecoms and the benefits to their business in doing so."

ROB DERBYSHIRE, MARSTON'S TELECOM.

TIMICO

We provide connectivity, hosting and unified communications to a new generation of MSPs, IT VARs and telecoms resellers. We're constantly exploring upcoming market needs and new opportunities which make us the ideal vendor and partner for all of your individual technology requirements.

JOHN FORD – TIMICO.

CHANNEL TELECOM

MiVad is an important opportunity to demonstrate to the reseller market that Channel Telecom can provide a flexible and dynamic, yet comprehensive portfolio which has matured over recent years, exploring new markets and introducing new revenue streams. We always put our partners first and we're keen to discuss with you the bespoke service we can offer.

CLIFFORD NORTON , CHANNEL TELECOM.

MYPHONES

The Altos platform from MyPhones, marks a radical new direction in the way that hosted IP telephony can be delivered and we're looking forward to discussing the opportunities it presents with MiVaD delegates., Altos offers an ultra-reliable, feature-rich experience at an astonishingly affordable price and delivers advanced features with an easy-to-use plug-and-play installation.

PHILLIPE MATOS - MYPHONES

UNION STREET

We're looking forward to providing delegates with demonstrations of our new Benchmarking Service. This business intelligence service enables aBILLity users to compare their business performance against that of an industry average derived from a large sample of our customer base.

VINCENT DISNEUR, UNION STREET.

FIDELITY ENERGY

At MiVaD we'll explore how you can grow additional margins from your trusted client relationships. We will help you quickly upskill your business, train your sales teams in the art of advising on energy, build a marketing plan and give you the tools you need to add energy to your product portfolio.

JOHN HAW, FIDELITY ENERGY.

OAK INOVATION

The major themes from Oak this year will include contact centre reporting (Evolve) being rolled out on new PABX's, our new flagship recorder, Clarify, our move into the hosted environment with selected partners, and last but not least, our range of Adaptive diallers and media blending platforms.

JAMES EMM, OAK INOVATION

VOICEFLEX

SIP carriers differ on applications offered and reseller engagement. Fraud protection's paramount, you and your customers should be protected, you'd be surprised to know not all SIP and hosted providers have fraud controls. Voiceflex has the UC alternative and it's a topic we'll certainly be covering at MiVaD.

PAUL TAYLOR, VOICEFLEX.

HH VENDOR FINANCE

HH Vendor Finance will be demonstrating how our technology solutions will allow mobile workforces to transact on customer site and get lease acceptance and documents electronically signed before they leave the client. The channel needs leading financial services, HH Vendor Finance provide them.

DANIEL PROCTOR, HH VENDOR FINANCE.

PBX COVER

By offering PBX Cover maintenance, services such as SIP and hosted telephony can be offered without the traditional stumbling blocks often encountered. The launch of our SIP gateway known as 'Money Box', allows the latest SIP connectivity to be deployed on legacy PBXs and allows for rapid customer acquisition.

DON MOORE, PBX COVER.

ZEST 4

The proposition from Zest4/ Arkessa offers a unique partnership opportunity which provides resellers with access to training, pre and post-sales support, competitive commercials, the technical expertise needed to win deals and secure revenue and the support needed to uncover opportunities within their existing customer base

MANDY FAZELYNIA, ZEST 4.

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Why billing platforms tal

The capabilities of billing systems will only be curbed by a lack of imagination and investment – such is their potential as a true platform for integration and innovation.

Demand for cloud-based systems has emerged as a major trend, not just in the billing space, but across the whole industry. So much so that Inform Billing provides its Eclipse software via the cloud as a matter of course, unless a customer requests otherwise. "Continued investment in cloud-based solutions that will simplify deployment as well as improve resilience will remain a key factor in our development," explained Shaun Bodsworth, Managing Director. "Using more up-to-date cloud-based technology will allow us to significantly advance our integration strategy and market share."

Inform Billing's proposition is two-fold. The first is geared towards new entrants in the comms market. "With this segment we base our proposition on simplicity of set-up, ease of use and we take care of hosting, servers, back-ups and licensing for our customers," added Bodsworth. "Our bureau service is priced as an entry-level option to help those starting out to get off on the right foot. Our second proposition is directed towards the established reseller looking to enhance their billing capability. This offering focuses on scalability of the software, reliability and the capacity for bespoke development alongside the existing complex feature set."

Inform Billing has doubled in size over the past two years. The company has developed close relationships with its customers and is able to respond swiftly to their development requests. "We strongly believe in the value of competition and have worked hard to position ourselves as a credible alternative for the larger reseller," added Bodsworth. "As an independent UK billing provider and a specialist in our field, we continue to promote the importance of independent billing options for resellers, rather than network or aggregator provided options.

"While we have always supported resellers to become self-sufficient with their billing and increase control and visibility over their customer base, we are finding that more and more resellers are happier to take advice and guidance from us and use our bureau billing team as an extension of their own. In the future we see the gap widening between those who want to buy 'Billing as a Service' and those who simply require a software solution."

The trend for outsourced services will continue to grow with a greater requirement for solutions that provide 'Billing as a Service', in addition to the traditional market for buying or renting a billing platform, believes Bodsworth. "Years ago a billing system was a large investment costing £20k-plus upfront," he stated.

Evolving model
"This is no longer the case, and the change in model has created an opportunity to nurture relationships, continue investment and essentially become more profitable as our customers succeed. The current trend, especially for fledgling companies, is to extend that link further by outsourcing all elements of billing to a specialist, freeing up precious time to go out selling and to grow the business."

According to Bodsworth there's a host of opportunities in non-core markets and

Inform Billing has to be selective when choosing which opportunities to pursue. Any diversion into a new business stream requires significant development to take a product to market that is 'off the shelf' but still meets a variable set of complex demands. "With the move to more subscription-based revenues comes opportunities outside of the traditional telecoms and IT arena," added Bodsworth. "This includes, but is not limited to, the growth in IoT and M2M markets. Our biggest challenge is to develop systems flexible enough to cope with these emerging opportunities, yet to still maintain the core functionality required by the masses."

In the midst of such a dynamic market it should come as no surprise that Inform Billing has an ongoing development cycle and reinvests around 40 per cent of revenue into development. "This year is turning out to be a year of development launches for Inform Billing," he said. "We will see continued improvements with a major relaunch of our Eclipse billing software before the end of the year, reaffirming our commitment to cloud-based solutions, but retaining the flexibility for those who want to manage their own hosting and hardware. We will also be releasing enhancements to our accompanying Enlighten customer facing web billing portal, and increasing our capacity to integrate with third party systems."

According to Stephen Redman, Head of Customer Services at Aurora, the traditional telecoms reseller will cease to exist and the broader portfolio that resellers are now offering requires a solution that can cope with the complex billing demands of different product types. "The paradox, however, is that as the underlying complexity grows, solutions need to become simpler, easier to use, and integrate with businesses and complementary systems," commented Redman. "We have already added a number of features to the Affinity solution."

He agrees that trends in the cloud and 'as a service' are reshaping the billing landscape. "Flexible billing solutions that can support a range of hosting options while maintaining high standards of service are a key aspect of Aurora's solution delivery," stated Redman. "The industry is in a constant state of change, bringing both challenges

Shaun Bodsworth

ke centre stage

and opportunity. Against this backdrop all resellers are seeking to differentiate their solution and for Aurora this challenge is an opportunity to tailor our solutions, from the modular aspect of the Affinity software that needs to integrate with other reseller systems, to defining the appropriate hosting and service solution."

As the world moves to a more connected environment with end users possessing multiple devices that are all talking to each other, the implications will extend to billing, pointed out Redman. "The need not only to hold and store data, but to understand and be able to act on it will play a greater role," said Redman. "For billing, this means that systems need to provide stakeholders with the means to analyse data quickly. It's no longer about waiting for a bill to arrive. Analysis needs to be as close to real-time as possible."

Aurora has relaunched its roadmap and this year will see through an evolution of the Affinity solution. Some of these developments are enhancements to the software suite. Others,

noted Redman, will be 'revolutionary' changes that will help Aurora's customers to gain a competitive advantage.

For Nick Jarret, Group Billing Manager at Nine Group, the biggest industry change has been the adoption of cloud-based alternatives to previously deployed on-site solutions. "As software companies continue to move their products to the cloud and open their doors to APIs, integration between these systems is becoming more common and the flexibility, time and cost-savings of having a hosted solution is starting to be realised," he said.

New entrants
"One of the most exciting developments is the changing profile of our customers. As the telecoms landscape continues to merge with other technologies, such as IT, we're supporting new customers who are branching out into telecoms from other backgrounds. Telecoms billing can be a complicated process, but it's something we've perfected over the 20 years that we've been providing bureau billing services to help resellers."

Nine has over 150 resellers using its Cascade WEB Billing system, giving the company a pool of feedback and suggestions that help to shape its development roadmap. "Our biggest challenge is deciding which of the many ideas to implement first," commented Jarret. "We've spent a long time developing the framework of Cascade WEB to be scalable, secure and resilient; and we're in a favourable position to build on our successes and integrate further ordering options and third party software, while accommodating new products and improving customer visibility, management and control for our resellers."

Integration to third party systems and automating from the point of order through to cash collection are also hot topics, noted Jarret. "Our customers are our drivers, so we can see first-hand the areas where we can add the most value," he said. "If you're able to integrate your ordering with your supplier and your billing information with your CRM, there's no reason you can't build on this to automatically recommend relevant products to the customer, demonstrate potential cost savings and allow them to place the order without you having to lift a finger.

"Billing systems will continue to evolve as new technologies emerge, but I envisage the ongoing movement being towards complementing third party software packages to offer resellers complete business solutions. I expect the future of billing systems to be in gateway solutions." ∎

Nick Jarret

Strong case for 'unified in

While call management rides the crest of a cutting edge technological wave, the term 'call management' is stuck in reverse. Here, we argue the case for a new, more fitting name, 'unified intelligence', to take its rightful place in the comms wordbook.

Here's an irony. The comms industry is infamous for attaching inventive jargon and modern acronyms to cutting edge technology, but the language of past glories sometimes outstays its welcome, languishing out of place and growing weak by definition. One such term is 'call management', and Phillip Reynolds, joint CEO at Oak Innovation, grapples with the old label. "As someone who has been in call management for 30 years I really struggle with the term 'call management'," he stated. "Historically, call management, call logging and communications management were all synonymous. But these days, with more sophisticated telephone systems, the advent of email, instant messaging, live chat and video conferencing available to every business from one employee upwards, the face of call management has changed beyond recognition."

Nomenclature aside, call management today is all about customer engagement, marketing, customer service and delivering efficiency across a broad platform of communications technologies. It's no longer the domain of large call centres with big budgets, it's available to every single business and is mandatory in this increasingly competitive world, according to Reynolds.

"The focus should be on capturing all customer interactions, almost becoming marketing platforms," he said. "We recently changed our strapline to 'innovation in business communication' which reflects everything we do at Oak, and where we want to take the industry. It's all about managing every form of business communication, not just telecoms. I would think 'unified intelligence' would be an apt description of understanding and measuring customer interactions, as well as quality measurement in call and data recording, and of course the reporting analytics to back this up."

There's more value in data if it can help to sell more, provide better customer service, or raise retention rates. The drivers for future call management solutions must therefore be aligned to these business objectives. "Future call management solutions will be bought as part of the IT infrastructure as opposed to the current telephony bias," added Reynolds. "With the move to hosted and cloud-based solutions all of Oak's new products can be run in hosted and virtualised environments as well as the traditional CPE deployment. And with the entry level market being eroded by hosted we are seeing a seed change in an industry that's slow to evolve. This really is a cultural shock where everything

Phillip Reynolds

"We recently changed our strapline to 'innovation in business communication' which reflects everything we do at Oak, and where we want to take the industry."

takes ten times longer than the computer industry, and a trend that the telecoms channel has to embrace."

Big shift
With the move from just telecoms management to all forms of communications management, Oak is seeing the big shift towards a data solution. The company is itself embracing this change by increasing R&D spend on both sides of the

Atlantic, through buying other businesses for their technologies, changing its recruitment policy and by building a marketing team to spread the word on new developments. "We're currently releasing Clarify, a new mid-market real-time call recorder with sophisticated quality measurement; as well as updated versions of Evolve, our contact centre management software, and our Adapt progressive and

predictive diallers," explained Reynolds. "These support the growth in informal call centres as well as increasing demand for more sophisticated call recording."

Oak has always aimed to be a one-stop-shop for resellers, offering call recording, call reporting and analytics, plus screen popping with CRM integration, all available for the SME and mid-market. "The launch of Clarify complements our existing RecordX call recording solution, so everything is covered from an entry level system right up to 4,000 extensions," added Reynolds.

"These are exciting but changing times. With good planning and wise investment, call management, or should I call it unified intelligence, will be a growth industry of which I'm happy to play a part. It's funny how things go full circle: I was developing cloud-based solutions in the late 70s and early 80s on Unix platforms. Now my team, led by my eldest son, are doing the same on Linux!"

Bart Delgado, Managing Director of Akixi, has witnessed significant growth in the enterprise space. Hosted service delivery has now entered the greenfield site and microsite markets, and Akixi has seen good uptake with multi-site deployments. "These traditionally required complex

ntelligence' in the lexicon

and costly, sometimes unreliable, technologies in order to provide some element of centralised management across disparate sites," said Delgado. "But hosted call management delivers this function as standard, out of the box and without a premium."

He also noted that more customers are demanding flexibility in size, tenure and even level of functionality. "Today's business is having to respond more dynamically to the demands of their customers, and as such they are favouring suppliers that are able to deliver to them on the same commercial basis. They want to be able to turn services on, off, up and down without costly penalties or long-term commitments."

Cost-effective call recording along with innovation in call management with UC and CRM integration means that SMEs can now take advantage of powerful solutions that deliver flexibility and real business intelligence. This comes at a time when more and more end customers are reviewing their business processes and communications strategies as they consider migrating to cloud-based offerings. "The availability and accessibility of business intelligence solutions, along with the same level of functionality that is present in premise-based offerings, are key factors behind the move to cloud telephony," said Tony Martino, Managing Director of Tollring.

"Expectations of business analytics applications are running high and call management intelligence has never been better. Market demand and

the development of the cloud are shaping these products and services."

According to Martino, the channel is being forced to embrace cloud services to remain competitive. "The shift to the cloud is uncovering the need for new features in any call management suite, such as proactive system monitoring for revenue assurance, fraud alarming and voice quality monitoring," he said. "These cutting edge features, along with new utilisation monitoring tools for partners, can deliver a competitive advantage to the channel."

Hot topic

Fraud has always been a hot topic and presents its own challenges in the telecoms world, but the latest developments in cloud-based call management solutions are positively impacting the way the channel manages customers and their usage behaviour. And while recurring revenue opportunities are synonymous with the cloud, the immediacy of cloud applications and the convergence of services makes revenue management an ongoing challenge for channel partners, believes Martino.

"The channel not only has the ability to proactively advise on products and services based on customer usage profiles, but also to protect their revenue streams through rich real-time data feeds that highlight any variances to the billing team," he added. "Revenue assurance tools are becoming not only a way for the channel to bill accurately, but also a means to differentiate. Another area of significant

interest is SP Analytics – enhanced value for the channel through utilisation of analytics, automated billing and self-provisioning."

For Martino, business and UC analytics are the new terms that describe Tollring's vision. It is about bringing together information from many sources, not just from calls, to deliver customer insights. "Business analytics is becoming a strategic pillar," he said. "Call management is a fundamental element of business analytics. This is evident in the fact that call management is becoming more about UC than calls. The adoption of new UC technology is being driven by the demands for business analytics to empower end users in making decisions and achieving RoI.

"In the not too distant future, this will be seen in SIP-based communications and the rapid adoption of Skype for Business and other UC tools that will extend call

management and recording solutions to include real-time communications, VoIP, instant messaging, UC, video and collaboration."

End users will be looking to consolidate their suppliers and work more intelligently. So the channel must remain relevant and become experts in their fields, delivering experience, expertise and advice. "They must become the trusted advisor to ensure their customers are investing in the right technology for their business," stated Martino. "For those customers that have made investments in the past, providers must advise them on how things have changed since they last purchased. They need to be mindful of where customers are in terms of their understanding of latest technologies, their buying attitudes and the timing of their investments.

"Customers adopting the latest cloud services and

communications technology will be keen to prove that investments are right for their business and they need to understand how their people are consuming services. Analytics and BI services can help our partners to prove their relevance, and in turn, help their customers to measure efficiencies from these transformational projects."

Tollring's iCall Suite (iCS) call analytics and recording solution is sold 100 per cent via the channel. In the coming months, Tollring will launch the latest iteration of iCS call analytics and recording globally – one single solution deployed in the cloud, as a hybrid model or on-premise, and accessible on any device. "This will cover all of our channel needs as our partners look to expand their offerings," noted Martino. "We feel the hybrid model provides partners with a strong entry level solution to the cloud."

Tollring will continue to deliver call management as a suite of fully integrated modules, and intends to take what it has learnt in the UK and replicate its successes in global markets. Partnerships with significant global players such as BroadSoft, Mitel and Samsung offer a foundation to do this.

"As a software developer, we've achieved incredible growth," said Martino. "There are big opportunities for both us and our channel partners. We must evolve continuously to ensure that our products and services are relevant to what our partners and customers need and want today. Plus, we must keep an eye on what they will need tomorrow." ∎

Tony Martino

"Expectations of business analytics applications are high and call management intelligence has never been better."

Get national recognition

The Comms National Awards is the ICT industry's respected and highly prized awards programme and this year's event promises to be bigger and better than ever.

There is something very special about the Comms National Awards, which opened for entries this month. Apart from being a national process and hugely respected for the finals night itself, the awards are highly prized because they reward excellence in the supply of solutions and support and are independently judged.

As Comms Dealer Editorial Director Nigel Sergent stressed, the awards have grown in status year-on-year and are now regarded as the 'Oscars' of the channel. "What differentiates the Comms Nationals from any other award programme is their focus on service and technological excellence. From a vendor/distributor perspective successful entries are those that demonstrate top class service provided to reseller partners and for resellers it's all about quality 'joined up' solutions provided to end user customers."

Over the years the Comms Nationals have always reflected changes in the industry and this year is no exception. With the growing importance of the Internet of Things and The Cloud, four new award categories have been introduced namely Best SME M2M/Wireless Solution, Best Enterprise M2M/Wireless Solution, Best SME Cloud Solution and Best Enterprise Cloud Solution. A channel entrepreneur award as also been added and, to acknowledge the 'best of the best', the process will recognise the UK's overall resellers in both SME and Enterprise Sectors.

As an added incentive for potential entrants this year the finals night will return to the sumptuous Hilton on Park Lane Hotel on October 13th – the home of the UK's best awards nights - and, as ever, the production values and hospitality will be first class.

For the third year running, the headline sponsor for the awards will be Nine Telecom who will again be encouraging resellers to enter the coveted Nine Customer Service Award category.

"This year we have brought the entry deadline back to July 29th so it is vital that companies register and start thinking about their entries sooner rather than later," added Sergent.

To register and download an entry form visit **www.cnawards.com**

2016 CN AWARDS CATEGORIES

VENDOR AWARDS

NETWORK CATEGORY
Best Mobile Network Provider
Best Fixed Line Network Provider

SERVICE PROVIDER CATEGORY
Service Provider Category (under £10m t/o)
Service Provider Category (above £10m t/o)
Best ISP

MOBILE DATA CATEGORY
Best Mobile Data Wholesale Service Provider

TELEPHONY CATEGORY
Best SME Telephony System
Best Enterprise Telephony System
Best End Point or Device

SOFTWARE APPLICATION CATEGORY
Best Call Management Solution
Best Billing Platform

DISTRIBUTION CATEGORY
Best Convergence Distributor
Best Mobile Distributor

PARTNER SERVICES CATEGORY
Best Channel Business Service
Best Installer/Maintainer

RESELLER AWARDS

CONTACT CENTRE CATEGORY
Best SME Contact Centre Solution
Best Enterprise Contact Centre Solution

VERTICAL MARKET CATEGORY
Best SME Vertical Market Solution
Best Enterprise Vertical Market Solution

IOT/WIRELESS CATEGORY
Best SME M2M/Wireless Solution
Best Enterprise M2M/Wireless Solution

CLOUD COMMUNICATIONS CATEGORY
Best SME Cloud Solution
Best Enterprise Cloud Solution

UNIFIED COMMS CATEGORY
Best SME UC Solution
Best Enterprise UC Solution

CUSTOMER SERVICE CATEGORY
Nine Customer Service Award

SPECIAL AWARDS

SME Reseller of the Year
Enterprise Reseller of the Year
Comms National Entrepreneur of the Year

Headline Sponsor

nine wholesale

BT wholesale — Service Provider Category

interoute — Cloud Communications Solutions Category

SPITFIRE — Software Application Category

TeleWare — Contact Centre Solution Category

UNION STREET — Vertical Market Solution Category

Voiceflex — Distribution Category

Knight

Weighing up the pros ar

Only a few channel leaders were happy to make their views about Brexit known and the majority of those that did favour the status quo. The uncertainty caused by the EU vote is an issue, but as Adam Zoldan from Knight CF optimistically put it: 'The level of funding, M&A, investment and consolidation in our sector will continue whether we remain in Europe or not'.

> To stay in the EU or to leave is the multi-billion-pound question for us all. How will this affect our business here at NEC is my question.

ANDREW COOPER
NEC

"For me much current opinion is too short sighted and more thought and consideration towards the longer term is vital. Over the past few weeks I've read opinions from top FTSE Company CEO's on whether or not to stay or to leave. In most cases I believe their views are based upon short term balance sheet and share dividend pressures rather than being viewed as a longer term, even 'generational' decision.

"In truth do any of us really have the facts to base a decision as to what's best either in the short or long term? As a patriotic Brit I know for sure that this country will succeed whatever the outcome and whether or not we decide to stay or to leave NEC will continue to thrive on the sound commercial basis of producing goods and services that customers wish to purchase.

f the UK votes to leave the European Community on June 23rd there will undoubtedly be a period of uncertainty and our market will not be immune to the upheaval.

No one really knows what the future brings, least of all post Brexit, but a trawl of the Net did find some observations on changes that might happen in the telecoms industry should a leave vote prevail.

The following thoughts of experts at business law firm Osborne Clarke are speculative, but do provide a backdrop to the issue which (a few) industry observers were happy to comment on for this month's Brexit Kaleidoscope. We hope the information and opinions laid out here may help you make up your mind in the polling booth on June 23rd.

There might be greater flexibility for Ofcom
Ofcom may no longer be bound by any initiatives arising out of the European Commission's Digital Single Market programme. For example, Ofcom could take its own decisions - entirely independent from other European National Regulatory Authorities - on whether or not "over-the-top" services and/or online platforms should be subject to any form of telecoms regulation.

The barriers to a Digital Single Market could be rebuilt
DSM is all about bringing these barriers down. Recent figures show that by 2030, London as part of the DSM could benefit in the region of £1.7billion in economic growth. Businesses need to consider how a British exit from the EU would impact the UK's ability to reap expected benefits of the Digital Single Market in the technological era. One process across the EU would mean businesses could expand more freely with one registration process, enabling them to operate anywhere in the EU.

UK telecoms operators would no longer be restricted by EU roaming provisions
This could culminate in a complete ban on roaming charges from June 2017 and give UK telecoms providers an opportunity to extract additional revenue from EU visitors making calls home from the UK. However, this might be a double-edged sword: UK operators could expect 'reprisals' from EU Member States when UK customers travel abroad.

Ofcom could decide to step away from the net neutrality provisions in the Connected Continent Regulation.
For example, Ofcom could take a more relaxed view on matters such as paid prioritisation deals between internet service providers and businesses seeking access to the ISP's network. This could see a number of new business and commercial models (including more use of promotions and zero-rated offers) emerging in the UK, which might be useful for UK businesses looking to benefit from the rapid growth of the Internet of Things.

The UK government might have greater flexibility to develop its own broadband strategy.
This could provide opportunities to UK-based business, as the UK would enjoy greater flexibility to support roll-out of high speed broadband with the UK government potentially no longer being bound by the EU State aid regime. Conversely, UK telecoms operators could struggle to leverage cost savings in the roll-out of high speed broadband that were previously guaranteed under the EU's directive on reduction of costs for deploying high-speed electronic communications networks.

> My view is that in a world which is becoming increasingly connected (both from a technological and political perspective), trying to operate on a stand-alone basis is not only naive but weakens the UK both from a business as well as economic angle. Those pursuing a Brexit increasingly remind me of the story of King Canute attempting to stop the tide.

ROD TONNA-BARTHET
ANNODATA

"Closing boarders with our European neighbours (the EU being our largest trading partner) will undoubtedly increase import levies, making products and services (be they telecom, mobile or other IT services etc) more expensive (not to mention the resulting increase in inflation and probable impact on rising interest rates) and subsequently push our export prices up abroad.

"Leaving the EU will inevitably result in a protracted period of increased commodity and FX volatility which will make our products more expensive abroad and business even more difficult and uncertain.

"So in summary, ignoring all fiscal commentators such as IDC, OBR, IMF etc. is madness as an exit is full of risk and uncertainty with inevitable upward pressure on costs and prices with limited upside on a risk/reward basis.

"Whilst the current arrangements of the EU are both expensive and overly bureaucratic, pulling up the drawbridge and pursuing a protectionist strategy is not the answer.

not Totally surprising

nd cons of a Brexit vote
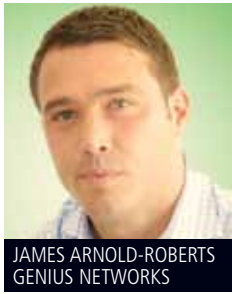
**JAMES ARNOLD-ROBERTS
GENIUS NETWORKS**

"I think barriers to the DSM can only be a missed opportunity, but it's not a show stopper. Sure, UK roaming charges could be a disadvantage competitively, but the impact of data roaming costs seems to be steadily declining with new technology and tariffs. Personally, I don't think European regulation shackles net neutrality and associated opportunities unduly. Similarly, I think the UK's broadband strategy is sufficiently advanced for an in or out vote to make no significant impact. Then, finally, there's M&A activity where, in my experience, Ofcom opinion and administration costs carry little importance in the complex, long term planning that goes with such strategic decisions.

"To the vast majority of us, the aforementioned are minutiae that resemble the music being played as the Titanic sinks. In particular, there are two big threats that my business and many others in the tech community fear. Firstly, the transition period is a concern: we all know how twitchy the investment community gets at the merest whiff of uncertainty. Faced with up to two years of uncertainty, the consequences are both unprecedented and unthinkable. The prospect of declining investment in the UK, a plummeting pound and rising interest rates seems a realistic scenario that can only leave the country, and my business, prone to stagnating business activity.

"Secondly, trade is a big worry. Europe is important to the trade of all the end users that drive our channel sales. A recent ICM survey reports 76% of respondents claimed that EU membership made the UK more attractive to international investment, with a further 75% stating that EU membership gave companies a better deal on trading within the EU. Furthermore, the irony for the 'exit' supporters is that amongst businesses currently selling to Europe, two thirds would still have to comply with EU regulations if we voted 'out'.

"Bearing in mind our economy still bear the scars of the past ten years, with UK National debt of £1.5 trillion or 80% GDP, an 'out' strategy can only be disastrous at a macro level for all those in the IT sector, before considering the consequences at a micro level.

**BOB FALCONER
GAMMA**

"Of all industries, telecommunications has been one of the slowest to benefit from a single market (at least on the service side – product may have fared better). The history of national monopolies, the huge investment required at an infrastructure level, the processes for number allocation, management, and porting, and the differences in regulatory policy etc have all played a part. Progress has, however, been made in recent years on harmonisation and removal of barriers (such as roaming), however much of the rhetoric has been around enabling effective cross border mergers of former state monopolies. This is not encouraging at all. However, having considered it at our board we have concluded that, on balance, it is better for the business to be in than out.

**JAMES EMM
OAK INNOVATION**

"Although my senior colleagues at Oak are still considering the EU Referendum – reasons to leave or remain - we seem, at least as an overall majority, to be moving to a consensus of Remain. In fact, I am already there personally. There are strong reasons on both sides, but for me, David Cameron received very little praise from his negotiations earlier this year in Brussels. He did win ongoing independence for the City of London banking system, he did win agreement for ongoing independence of our legal system in many areas and he also won some limitations on EU immigration although some would say not enough. But then negotiation is…negotiation, at the end of the day. And we do of course keep the pound!

"In an uncertain world, better in than out; this country and this industry, both of which I love, have done very well in recent years, and I would not wish to enter, knowingly, a time of uncertainty and risk. From Oak's position we would not want anything to hinder our sales into the EU.

**ADAM ZOLDAN, KNIGHT
CORPORATE FINANCE**

"Whilst the implications for Brexit may be significant, I find it difficult to see how it will have a major impact on our industry particularly in the channel.

"The most effective regulation we have seen from the EU in its entirety is probably in the mobile sector with firstly the introduction of the Europe-wide GSM mobile technology and more recently the regulation of roaming charges. Alternatively, Ofcom's attempts at regulation in the UK of late have been rather poor. For example, its attempts to regulate the non-geographic number market have ended up with consumers paying more.

"In the UK it has always been competition that has driven the market forward. Just think back to the impact of the launch of Orange or TalkTalk or when could first offer line rental from Openreach. This level of competition, certainly in fixed line services, has not been replicated in Europe.

"With regards to the future and the digital economy it seems that we are all looking to the US rather than Europe as innovation partners. Think Microsoft, Broadsoft and the impact of social media, as opposed to Alcatel, Siemens, Nokia, Ericsson who have their best days behind them. However, in this arena the UK is able to stand independently as a true innovator and this has been borne out by M&A and investment.

"As for consolidation, the vast majority of transactions are UK to UK, but we have seen a whole host of US buyers acquire in the UK of late – Broadsoft, 8x8, Zayo, J2global and plenty of investment from US private equity, including XLN, 6 degrees, Claranet and New Voice Media.

"Knight CF believes the impact of Europe in the UK telecoms sector has been and will be limited and that continued strong competition will drive innovation which in turn will ensure that the level of funding, M&A, investment and consolidation in our sector will continue whether we remain in Europe or not.

**ADRIAN BARNARD, COMMS
INDUSTRY COMMENTATOR**

"Come the 23rd of June I guarantee two things. Firstly, the UK public will be EU-fatigued and secondly our UK telecoms market won't change much whatever the result. In my commercial lifetime our glorious industry has changed a lot.

"The players who shape the market – Ofcom, MNO's, international corporates and BT have danced in tune for some time. Prior to Ofcom's creation the UK's clear regulatory framework meant we led the world. Privatisation and continued deregulation had worked, competition was growing, our industry flourished and consumers and businesses enjoyed some of the keenest telephony pricing in the world. In short, competition was working.

"Roaming charges, a piece of populist EU legislation if ever there was, might be newsworthy but will it be influential in helping the Remain cause? London is not the EU centre of tech, finance and creativity because Frau Schmidt calls home cheaply whilst visiting the Tower. Start-ups abound because a favourable tax-regime encourages investment and the influence of the City and its global role are a reality.

"Viewed solely through the Comms lens, the Brexit question is moot. In our glorious industry the market is commoditised and revenue/price erosion is a reality. Locality is less relevant, the Cloud is a harbinger of further consolidation and the cost of the nation's core comms services is rising through lack of competition and suppliers are merging.

"Whoever can show me increasing completion and equality of access will get my vote. And if whoever wins can deliver a stimulated comms market place with access to services available closest to consumers then UK PLC will win. Change is inevitable; growth is optional. Perhaps the referendum will remind us all of this fact.

**RICHARD CARTER
NIMANS**

"As well as the personal ramifications of the EU vote, equally important is the impact it will have on UK PLC and the comms industry in general. It's clearly hard to assess the true extent of remaining in or out. Time will tell whether the right decision is eventually made. At the moment it's extremely difficult to work out fact from fiction.

"In recent years the comms industry has become very much pan-European. For me there are some strong arguments for remaining as part of the EU but perhaps there are more 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. However, there's been some overzealous scare mongering about the impact of leaving. Opponents point to the high cost of EU membership and how Brussels has too much influence on our daily and working lives which is why I'm leaning towards Brexit.

comms dealer
SALES & MARKETING AWARDS

THE SHORTLIST

As Comms Dealer went to press the finalists for this year's Comms Dealer Sales Awards were gearing up for a day of celebration at the Park Lane Hotel in London. See our June issue for details of all winners and pictures of the finals luncheon and Comms Dealer's 20th anniversary party sponsored by Fidelity Energy.

3CX Marketing Team

Frontier Peter Southgate

Agilitas Account Team

Agilitas Marketing Team

Altnet Team

Annodata Team

Avnet UK Marketing Team

Berry Sales Team

Fidelity Team

Channel Telecom Team

Blabbermouth Team

BDR Tom Chedham

BT John Kiernan

CommsCare Team

Entanet Sales Team

Daisy Sales Tam

CloudSource

Exsel Tom McDonald

Focus Chris Goodman

3CX Sales Team

Gamma Team

GCI Team

Ingram Micro Agency

italk Team

Jabra Scott Smith

KG Moore Kim Moore

Lilly Team

Virtual1 Sales Team

Nimans Julian Niman

Nimans Ian Brindle

Nimans Paul Burn

netConsult

NSN

NTA Team

plan.com Sales Team

Provu Marketing Team

Union Street Marketing Team

TMS Team

True

Shoretel Gary Gould

Telecoms World

Union Street

Larato Lucy Green

Zest4 Mandy Fazelynia

Voiceflex Paul Taylor

Wickhill Team

MCL Team

Voipon Team

Pragma Team

Cisillion Marketing Team

Apt2chat Nolan Braterman

GHM Simon Hayler

Siphon Team

Calteq Team

Loop Reseller Sales Team

Simwood's key hire

Cal Leeming

SIMWOOD has accelerated its growth momentum with a series of staff promotions and high profile hires. Information security specialist Cal Leeming joins as Associate Director in charge of new internal developments.

He was formerly one of the UK's most prolific hackers but over a decade later is now an expert adviser to business, Government and frequently the media. He has trained the MoD and the NCA on security and regularly appears on TV as a reformed character. Leeming also worked for a number of Silicon Valley companies in senior positions before joining Simwood.

Reaffirming its commitment to people development Simwood has promoted Ross McKillop to the role of Associate Director; Porting Manager Rachel Dowling becomes Senior Manager; Project Manager Adele Dowling is posted to the Operations Manager role; and Operations Desk Agent Chris Keller has been promoted to Level 2 Support Engineer based in Southampton. Thomas Lauro joins Simwood as a Node.js developer. He moves from a Tokyo-based B2B e-commerce company to bolster the company's Mauritius operation.

"The vast majority of our team are technical, genuinely top of their game and largely invisible to customers," said Managing Director Simon Woodhead. "We have 100 per cent retention of staff and a happy productive team. We're in a really exciting place right now."

Also on the move...

Joe Murphy

JOE Murphy has joined Onecom as Head of Corporate Sales. He moves from Gamma and was formerly Adept Telecom's Sales and Marketing Director. He said: "I've always admired Onecom and those that lead it. To be part of Onecom's ambitious future is fantastic and I will bring all of my previous experience with me to this new and exciting role." Hampshire-based Onecom has six regional offices with a 300-plus headcount. CEO Darren Ridge added: "Joe's experience, which combines a variety of skills with a number of successful telecommunications companies, will be a great asset to Onecom."

BOB Swallow is to lead Logicalis UK as MD following his promotion from Sales Director and the completion of a wider company restructure. He said:

Bob Swallow

"We understand that prioritising digital transformation is front of mind for many progressive organisations, therefore we've spent the past 12-18 months adapting our own business to support and serve our customers on their digital transformation journeys." Mark Rogers, CEO, added: "Bob brings a wealth of experience to the role having spent the past three decades leading IT businesses in key sales and executive management positions."

Virtual1 gets finance guru

Magnus Batsvik-Miller

VIRTUAL1'S growth ambitions are clear following the hire of Magnus Batsvik-Miller as CFO, who, in his previous role as World First Group CFO, oversaw 400 per cent growth in four years. "Magnus brings a great skill set to our finance and accounting team from his experience at World First and previous positions at Deloitte, Hutchison Whampoa, Carphone Warehouse and Minit Operational Board," said Virtual1 CEO Tom O'Hagan. "He will be instrumental in providing the finance vision, strategy and leadership to help the company get to the next level."

Batsvik-Miller added: "It's a great time to join a dynamic company and I look forward to playing an instrumental role in Virtual1's strategic growth."

F5 NETWORKS has appointed David Helfer as VP of Worldwide Channels. He joins from the cybersecurity firm Lookout where he served as VP of Worldwide Channels and managed direct sales for the Asia Pacific region. He also worked at Juniper Networks where he was responsible for worldwide channels and commercial sales and OEM sales in the Americas and partner/alliance sales in the EMEA. F5 Networks also appointed Peter Brant as its new SVP of North America Sales.

Dixon plugs into energy

ICT resellers are uniquely placed to add energy provision to their service portfolio and take advantage of upfront revenue share deals advises Sean Dixon, who has joined Fidelity Energy

Sean Dixon

as Partner Account Manager. GB rower Dixon built the award winning sales team at Fidelity Group's ICT channel from 2014 after his Olympic ambition was side-tracked. He oversaw a growth in revenue to £8 million and helped secure the Account Team of the Year Award for Fidelity at the Comms Dealer Sales Awards. "Fidelity Energy is growing fast and has big plans, I wanted to be part of that," he said.

By adding energy to their portfolios Dixon believes reseller partners should be able to leverage their established trusted relationships within their base with ease. "It's an established business principle that the more products you sell to a customer the less likely they are to churn," he commented. "This and the fact that margins are the same for energy as telecoms means the opportunity is huge."

Perkins named Metronet's CEO

STEPPING into the CEO role at Manchester-based network operator and ISP Metronet is Lee Perkins, who brings 20 years experience working in senior commercial roles including stints at Tech Data UK, Computacenter and IQ-Sys. He was most recently EVP and Managing

Lee Perkins

Director of Sage UK&I. Perkins is involved with the Northern Powerhouse and Digital Skills of the North and is a member of the Tech North Advisory Board as well as a leadership committee member for the Princes Trust.

Andy Lockwood, Chairman of Metronet (UK), commented: "Securing a CEO of Lee's pedigree to drive the next phase of our growth and development is a reflection of the scale of our opportunity and ambition."

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