



Zen's Stobart
throws down the
gauntlet p20

Gamma CEO lauds
get-ahead UK
comms channel p24



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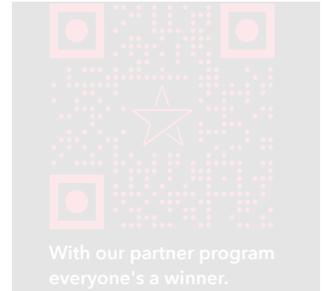
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Comms Dealer October 2019 Click to open FCS fears chaos over numbering

The Federation of Communications Services (FCS) has urged CPs to wake up over ongoing numbering and porting issues and help prevent industry chaos.

SPECIAL REPORT

The industry body has issued a clarion call in response to fears that unless the comms sector clearly understands what needs to be done to secure 'safe' numbers for customers the market could become an unregulated mess by the time Openreach turns off 16 million PSTN lines and WLR in 2025.

Ofcom is in the throes of investigating several options to take UK number porting forward, including blockchain

technology, a prototype platform and a portal.

These will enable industry groups and selected service providers to test the services before a decision is made in early 2020 on a way forward. Feedback on progress from the ICT industry is vital according to Paul Overbury, Senior Technology Expert at the watchdog.

Speaking at last month's The Future of Numbers event staged in London by the FCS, Overbury said: "Two years ago there was no path to fix the

numbering issue but the block-chain is now built with porting and number allocation and a management process.

"Over time we're looking to build long-term trust into telephone numbers and cryptography will lock in that trust. People in the industry should take an interest in this as it is important to all stakeholders."

FCS CEO Itret Latif (pictured) said: "Number ownership needs to be clarified and there should be a root and branch exploration." **Cont' on page 33**

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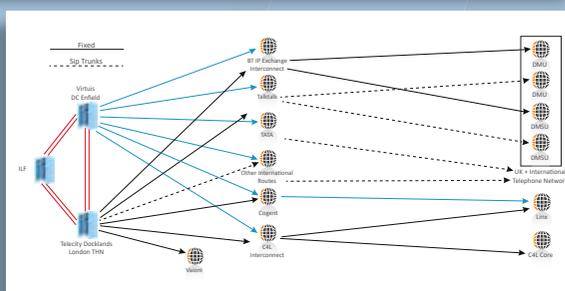


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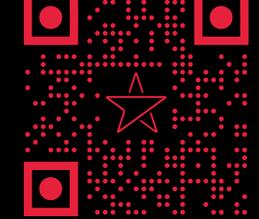
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EDITOR'S COMMENT



Stuart Gilroy

FINDING a remedy for number porting challenges has long been as elusive as plain language in comms technology speak. But as our front cover this month shows, moves are afoot to finally address this long-in-the-tooth issue. Yet more still needs to be done to formalise a strategy for this most basic

of industry functions which, if not put right fast, will make a mockery of the sector's claim as the modern builder of Digital Britain. Indeed, the industry must be modern on all fronts and that includes resellers at the coalface.

But what do we mean by modern and whizz-bang when full fibre is more and more referred to as a 'utility'. This fundamental building block for an all-digital Britain, that also underpins 5G roll outs, must surely be seen and spoken about in higher terms than utilitarian. As a true enabler it should be so attractive to users as not to be seen by them as a tap turned on and off at will, with paid for usage switching to and fro easily between providers as we do with gas, electricity and water, after finding a better deal. Wherein lies the loyalty?

Modernity in the comms channel is less about the latest technology and more about service, experience and loyalty. These are earned, not bought, and for many end user organisations there will surely come a time when they will seek the best connectivity deal but won't be able to put a price on their relationship with a trusted ICT provider.

Remember the warnings of being left behind? It was then about skills and cloud and moving to a recurring revenue model. Now, it's about building a loyal customer base first and foremost, and balancing a utility play with the real value of your customer relationships. Those channel players that fail to achieve equilibrium may come to find that their number is truly up.

Stuart Gilroy, Editor

• V12 Telecom's Charles Rickett ratchets up Teams play (p32).

Maxfield seals sale to European giant

WATERLAND-backed and newly rebranded Enreach (formerly Within Reach Group), based in the Netherlands, has strengthened its position in the UK IT and comms market with the acquisition of Network Telecom in Telford.

Network Telecom was established by MD Paul Maxfield in 1997 and provides telephony, hosted voice, lines and calls, connectivity, mobile and IT services to circa 2,400 small businesses. Maxfield will continue to work with the business.

"Over the past few years we have worked hard on a new direction to provide our customer base with a complete portfolio of communication and IT solutions," said Maxfield.

"The acquisition will not only help facilitate our customers' growth, but also the growth of the entire group."

Enreach CEO Stijn Nijhuis stated: "The acquisition is our first significant step into the UK market, extending our UK ecosystem and local expertise and resources. Network Telecom currently delivers its business through the direct channel and the goal will be to create joint proposals for Enreach's channel business and partners."



Paul Maxfield

The seed of a deal was sown when telecoms and technology adviser Knight Corporate Finance was approached by Enreach which was seeking a platform acquisition in the UK, and in its capacity as a long-term adviser to Network Telecom, Knight matched the opportunity to Maxfield's operation and facilitated the transaction process.

"That Enreach was looking for a UK platform to build on was particularly attractive to the Network Telecom founder, representing a positive opportunity for staff," stated Knight Director Paul Billingham.

"Despite being a relatively low profile business in the

comms industry Network Telecom is one of the great success stories."

Maxfield added: "While I was not expecting to sell the company at this stage, the opportunity from Enreach was too good to turn down."

German UC vendor Swyx merged with Enreach in July 2018 and acquired French UC and FMC provider Centile at the same time.

In addition, Enreach is the parent company of Voiceworks and ipnordic, and last month also acquired communications and IT service provider Crystal Networks in the Netherlands, bolstering its influence in the European UC market. **See p14**

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NEWS ROUNDUP

CYBER security player Palo Alto Networks is to acquire IoT security company Zingbox in a \$75m cash deal. The acquisition is expected to close during Palo Alto Networks' fiscal first quarter of 2020. "The proliferation of IoT devices in enterprises has left customers facing an enormous gap in protection against cyber security attacks," said Nikesh Arora, Chairman and CEO of Palo Alto Networks. "With the proposed acquisition of Zingbox we will provide a subscription for our next generation firewall and Cortex platforms that gives customers the ability to gain control, visibility and security of their connected devices at scale."

GLOBALISATION, increasing relevance to customers and a boost to warehouse efficiency have all been credited as the catalysts of a 30% year-on-year hike in Agilitas's profits (on a 26% increase in turnover). The channel services provider, which operates in over 60 countries, reported £12m turnover in FY19 and £2.6m group profit. CEO Shaun Lynn said: "By streamlining the way we do business to make ordering easier for our partners, we help them drive growth in their business too."

Revenues optimised via billing

THAT modern billing systems are becoming vital platforms for business growth is a proposition strongly advanced by Tekton.

The firm, which launched its Zoey billing platform to the channel in June this year, provides resellers with margin management and enhancement tools which the firm claims are a boon to resellers seeking to boost revenues.

"In the current race to offer connectivity at the lowest price possible it has become increasingly difficult for providers and resellers to increase their revenue while staying competitive," said MD Terry McKeever.

In this environment, according to McKeever, it is key for billing systems to reduce the time required to qualify margins, whether by customer, CLI or network, and push data analysis to the limit.

"A granular overview of the customer base and actionable usage data enables partners to discover new products and services as well as develop existing ones, with detailed buyer personas created based on customer behaviour," added McKeever.

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Flick hints at M&A amid cloud growth



Martin Flick

CEO Martin Flick added: "We're now in a strong position to consider further expansion opportunities and M&A activity to enhance our capabilities and develop our proposition."

BGF-backed Olive Communications reported a sharp rise in cloud revenues, up 48% at year end (31st January 2019), driving a three percentage point uplift in gross margins to 44.2%, with gross profit falling less than 1%.

The High Wycombe-based comms provider's EBITDA rose 43% to £2.1m on revenues down 7.6% at £28.9m, due to ongoing mobile pressures such as EU roaming charges and MNO moves to optimise tariffs, said the firm. Ongoing cost reductions resulted in a 43% increase in EBITDA to £2.1m, for a 7.3% margin.

Brett Morris, CFO, stated: "Our cloud services are going from strength to strength, delivering high recurring revenues plus associated project and implementation revenues."

"This continued growth in cloud services, supported by Vodafone encouraging mobile only users to adopt OneNet unified comms, together with a better year for mobile means we expect revenues to return to growth in the current year to January 2020.

"EBITDA margins are set to continue to expand, which all points to continuing EBITDA growth for the current year."

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A double deal for Simwood



Simon Woodhead

TWO acquisitions bagged by Simwood Group add a wholly owned scalable multi-branded hosted PBX platform and a retail brand.

The Bristol-based wholesale carrier has acquired the entire share capital of Sipcentric and Birchills Telecom.

Sipcentric, a long-standing Simwood partner, provides Platform-as-a-Service hosted PBX to channel partners; while Birchills Telecom is a veteran reseller in the SME market.

“Sipcentric has sailed under the radar somewhat and built a modern user friendly platform but few know about it – yet,” stated Simwood founder and CEO Simon Woodhead.

Sipcentric founder and CEO (and Birchills CEO) Charles Chance commented: “We’ve spent nine years building our platform and team without any significant investment.

“As part of the Simwood Group we’ll not only be able to deliver more value to customers faster, with its technical and commercial expertise we’ll also be able to extend our reach and help shape the future of the industry for the better.”

Chance remains CEO of Sipcentric and continues to work from its Birmingham base.

Simwood was established in 1996 and services over 200 wholesale customers in more than 52 countries.

NEWS ROUNDUP

OPENREACH has identified 29 towns, cities and boroughs for FTTP roll outs over the coming 18 months. Overall, 103 locations across the UK have now been included in Openreach’s Fibre First programme. Openreach this year raised its target for full fibre connections from three to four million premises by March 2021, with an ambition to reach 15 million by the mid-2020s and ultimately the majority of the UK if the right investment conditions are in place. CEO Clive Selley said: “Every 28 seconds we pass a home or business with our new full fibre network.”

AKIXI’S analytics platform has received a boost with the roll out of version 2.0. This latest release offers an updated user interface design and refreshed look to wallboards and reports. It also includes Akixi 3000, a new product which introduces omni-channel reporting. The initial outing brings group email reporting, enabling users to manage calls and emails on a single interface with functionality for additional channels to follow in subsequent releases.

BDR completes Icom buy with opening of refurbished office

BDR’s acquisition of Kent-based telecoms, IT and security specialist ICOM has been sealed with the official opening of the company’s refurbished offices in Aylesford by local MP Tracey Crouch.

Through acquisitions and organic growth, BDR is on track to more than triple revenues from the £9m it notched up 18 months ago to £32m this year.

Malek Rahimi, BDR Operations Manager, stated: “Icom’s integration of BDR’s performance culture, behavioural standards and thirst for progress has created one of the fastest



growing companies in Kent two years running.

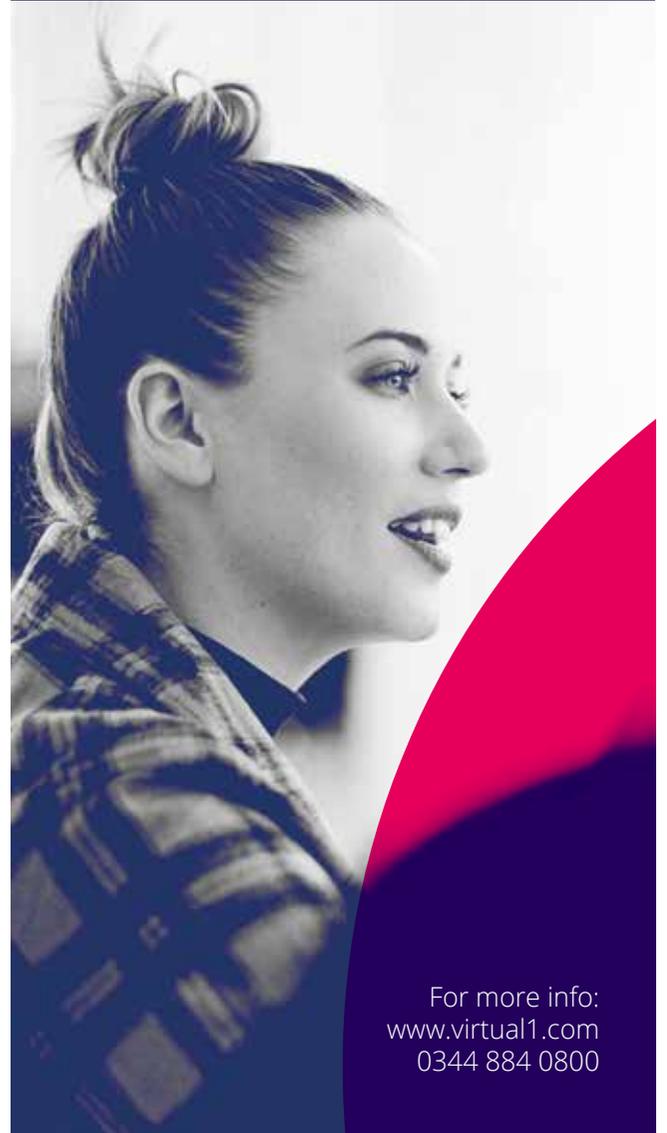
“Working alongside Icom MD John Donoghue and his team we’re looking forward to further growth as we maximise on Icom’s reputation.”

Pictured above: Malek Rahimi; Tonbridge and Malling Deputy Mayor Councillor Roger Roud, BDR CEO Bahman Rahimi; Tracey Crouch; John Donogue and Icom Sales Director Kevin Godfrey.



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ScanSource makes cloud-only pledge

HOT on the heels of its purchase of Bristol-based cloud services provider Inty, ScanSource has put its European and UK hardware businesses up for sale and set out its stall as a cloud-only distributor for UK resellers.

The company says it aims to be the leading partner for resellers seeking to meet growing customer demands from end users for 'everything connected' cloud solutions.

Speaking at the company's Horizon partner event staged at Wembley Stadium, EMEA President Paul Constantine and Vice President of Cloud Solutions and Services Paul Emery outlined the company's new strategy to help partners embrace cloud opportunities.

"Now it's everything cloud," stated Emery. "With the acquisition of Inty it's clearly the direction we're going in, bringing new opportunities and new revenue streams to partners."

Emery pointed out that acquiring cloud specialists is nothing new to ScanSource which has previously bought Intelisys and Salesforce cloud consultant Campango.

"We already have thousands of partners transacting at this level," he added. "What we're



Paul Constantine

doing now is bringing this capability to ScanSource comms partners and new partners.

"It's not just about communications, it's about multiple cloud elements, so the proposition becomes a complete end-to-end solution with connectivity, UCaaS, Security as a Service, data centre services and, with the integration of Inty, Microsoft plays a big part."

Constantine reiterated that ScanSource will continue with its traditional distribution business in the US, Canada and Brazil, but the UK operation will now be 100% laser focused on cloud, and he hopes a buyer will be found soon for the hardware business.

He also did not rule out further acquisitions in the cloud space in the future. "It is sad to divest a business that we've been in for almost 20 years



Paul Emery

in Europe and in the UK, and hopefully a great partner will step in to take care of our people and customers on the hardware side," said Constantine.

"There is so much neat stuff in the cloud space we felt it was important for us to focus our resources on where we could get the greatest return."

Emery believes that most resellers will now want to talk about being ready to provide cloud solutions for customers and says ScanSource has the support mechanisms in place to assist.

"Most of our partners are hesitant to invest ahead, which we understand," he added. "The role we play is to not to push hard, but be on hand when partners are ready to offer cloud solutions, whether it's just selling Microsoft Office 365 licenses or UCaaS CRM solutions."

MacRae's in Maintel CEO post

MAINTEL has pulled in Avaya UK and Ireland MD Ioan MacRae as CEO commencing 14th October. He takes over from former chief exec Eddie Buxton who joined the business in 2009.

Prior to Avaya MacRae held a number of senior leadership positions within the comms industry in the UK and internationally. He worked with Maintel for a number of years as a strategic business partner.

Maintel's Chairman John Booth said: "Ioan is the perfect candidate to lead the next phase of Maintel's development.

"He has significant experience in our sector and a track record of leading successful businesses through times of transition and high growth."



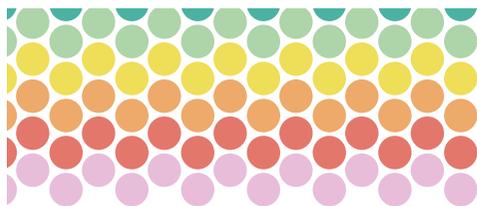
Ioan MacRae

NEWS ROUNDUP

MOBILE device leasing firm Lease Telecom has appointed Eurostar Global Electronics as a UK partner. Eurostar Global MD Peter Carnall stated: "The increasing cost of devices coupled with managed services means that leasing propositions are a growing requirement for growth." Lease Telecom co-founder Simon Fabb added: "This will give mobile resellers access to expertise and commercials to close more business."

CLOUD IT infrastructure revenue dropped 10.2% year-on-year in Q2 to \$14.1bn, according to IDC data. The decline reflects an overall industry slowdown with private cloud sales shown to be the most stable sector. IDC also lowered its forecast for total spending on cloud IT infrastructure in 2019 to \$63.6bn, down 4.9% from last quarter's forecast.

CITYFIBRE is to extend its full fibre network in Northampton to reach almost every home and business in the town. Vodafone will also use CityFibre's network to deliver Gigafast broadband services. The first homes and businesses will be able to connect to the network early next year, with work projected to be largely complete by the end of 2022.



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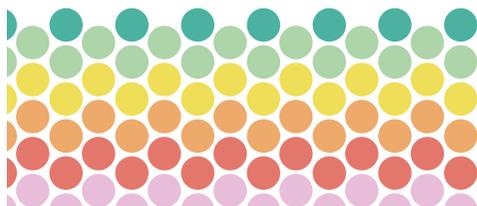
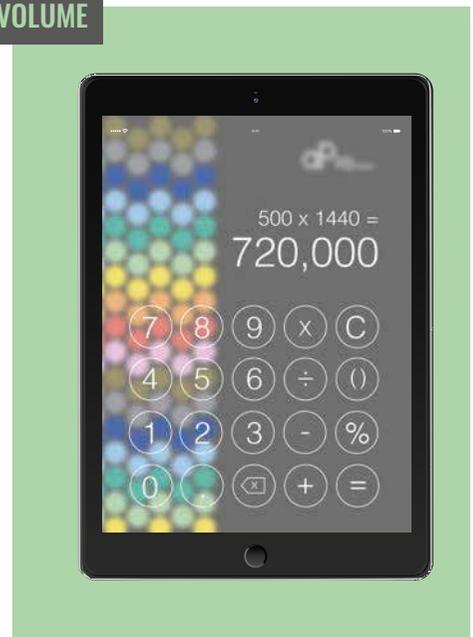
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DIGITAL Wholesale Solutions (DWS) has partnered with FirstWave Cloud Technologies to bring cloud-based security solutions to its base of more than 2,000 channel partners. The aggregator has introduced two new solutions, Guardian Email and Guardian Web, designed to protect businesses of any size from malicious attacks. "The security landscape is becoming increasingly complex with more and more businesses working in the cloud, making it vital for them to have an efficient security solution in place," said DWS CEO Terry O'Brien.

THE former MD of TalkTalk's direct business Pete Tomlinson is to spearhead Windsor Telecom's growth ambitions as the Camberley-based comms provider's CEO. Tomlinson brings experience in scaling telecoms and tech businesses and is credited with masterminding the reinvention of Eclipse, more than doubling the size of the business prior to its integration with KCOM. He has also held leadership roles at Cable&Wireless and Fibernet. "Windsor has a massive opportunity to expand its portfolio of services and markets and take full advantage of its expertise," said Tomlinson.

Dutch firm in reseller hunt



Lucas de Clercq

NETHERLANDS-based software development firm PeterConnects is on the hunt for UK resellers keen to give customers enhanced attendant console services on Cisco, BroadSoft and Microsoft UC platforms.

PeterConnects claims to be already working with over 100 of the biggest partners internationally and says the company has recorded a 300% increase in revenues in the UK this year.

"When receptionists, switchboard operators and service desk staff pick up the phone or respond to a message they shape the way customers perceive a company," stated UK Country Manager Tim Field.

"Our solutions add customer insight, reachability context and control to every omnichannel conversation in a single pane of glass."

All PeterConnects solutions, namely Attendant, ServiceDesk, ManagerAssistant, ContextManager and OmniDirector, have been developed by JDM Software, a Cisco Preferred Solution Partner and Microsoft Partner which CEO Lucas de Clercq acquired in 2016.

Speaking at the UK leg of its European roadshow in London, De Clercq said he was targeting SME and enterprise markets exclusively through the channel and is seeking relationships with resellers and larger partners already providing UC and contact centre solutions.

"With our solutions, anyone calling an organisation will get relevant context relating to that customer," said De Clercq. "We support all types of communication including WhatsApp, Facebook and Webchat."

Oak gives healthcare big boost

A NEW platform designed for the health sector that integrates CRM with telephony has been unveiled by Oak Innovation.

Called ContactAssist for Healthcare, the new solution works with popular clinical record systems such as EMIS Web and TPP SystmONE to improve workflow and the patient experience.

According to Oak's CTO David Reynolds the New Number Capture capability helps to keep contact information up to date to combat DNAs, support mass notification and click-to-dial phone triage.

"In the healthcare sector both efficiency and workflow improvement are key to providing better patient care," commented Reynolds.

"We have drawn on years of experience to deliver a product that works across a range of healthcare settings including GP and dental practices."

Reynolds also noted that ContactAssist offers deployment options, either across a single site, a Primary Care Network or Federated Practices to unify communications.

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Foothold hailed in east area

DESPITE what it says on the tin, South West Communications Group also has a long held presence in the eastern region of England, three decades to be exact.

Initially set-up by Sales Training and Development Manager Lynne Howard to serve a large customer based in west Sussex, the south east office in Portchester Business Centre near Portsmouth marked its 30th birthday last month.

Sales Manager Daniel Fuller-Smith stated: "Despite our obvious roots in the south west we have multiple customers in Hampshire, Surrey, Berkshire, West Sussex and East Sussex.

"Reaching 30 years illustrates how established we are in these areas and our general longevity in the industry."

Sales Director Sarah Flowers said: "Although our HQ is in Exeter we have maintained our Hampshire base to give us easy access to existing and potential new customers."



The swcomms east team

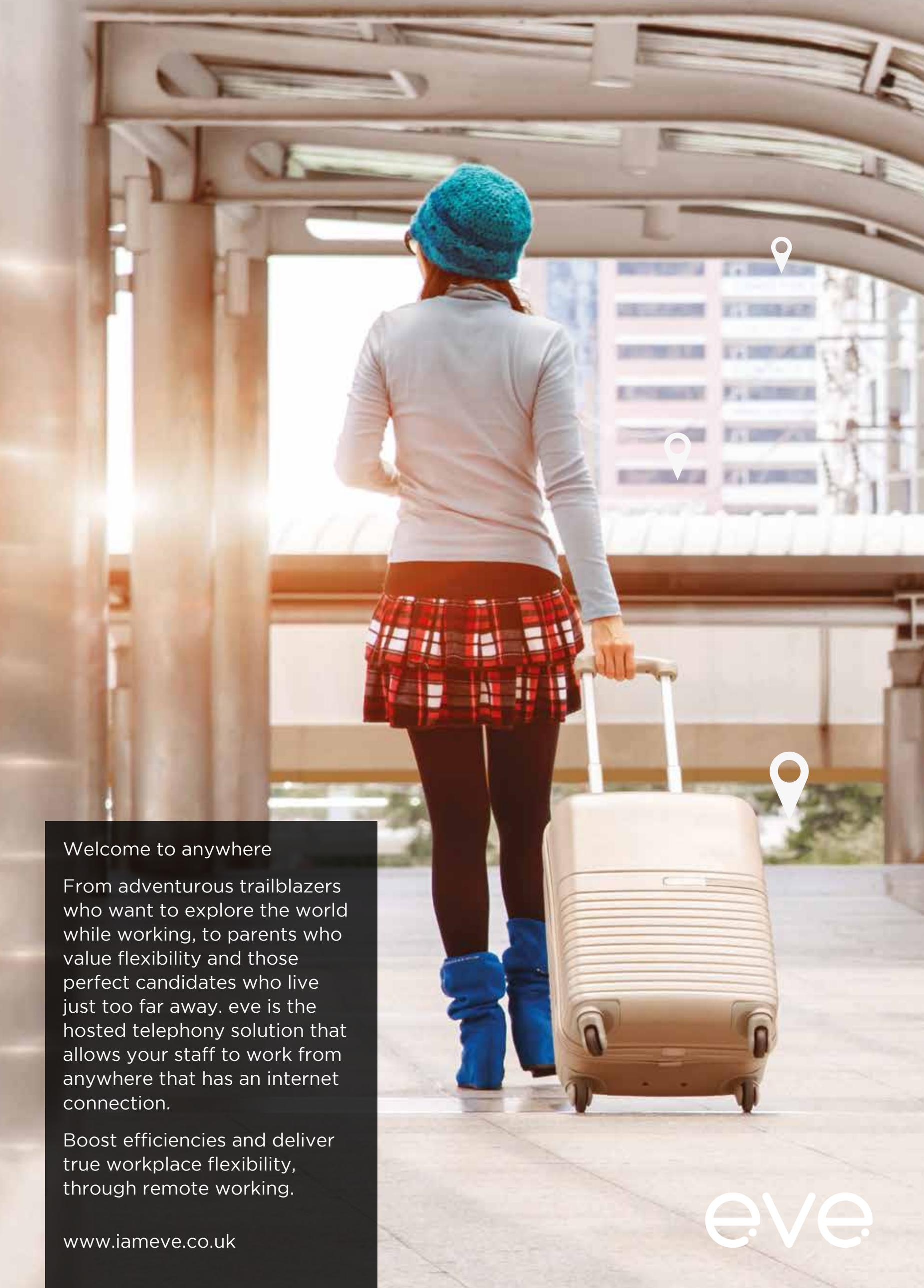
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NEWS ROUNDUP

IT SOLUTION provider Insight UK has joined forces with 8x8 to drive adoption of cloud comms in the public sector. The link-up introduces Insight UK's clients to 8x8's X Series collaboration and contact centre services. Darren Hedley, Director of Public Sector, Insight UK, commented: "Working with 8x8 gives us the scope to provide clients with UC and contact centre software on a subscription basis."

AV DISTRIBUTOR Midwich's results for the 12 months to 30th June show a 19.2% revenue hike to £314.8m, with organic growth of 5.1% (discounting recent acquisitions). Gross margin was reported at 16.6%, 0.4% ahead of H1 2018, and the adjusted operating profit increased by 8.6% to £14.6m.

GENESYS' EMEA Cloud Partner of the Year award has been collected by Foehn, its third gong in three years having picked up Genesys' PureCloud Partner of the Year UK & Ireland prizes in 2017 and 2018. James Passingham, Foehn CTO, commented: "The award recognises the capabilities we have built to address the customer experience challenges faced by businesses operating on an international scale."

C-level move by CityFibre



Steve Holliday

THE former CEO of National Grid Steve Holliday, a dab hand at delivering national utility infrastructure projects, has been pulled in by CityFibre as Non-Executive Chairman.

Holliday was also Non-Executive Director of retail giant Marks & Spencer from 2004 to 2014 and the Defra Lead Non-Executive Director between 2016 and 2017.

"The Government's target for national full fibre coverage by 2025 is an ambitious ask but CityFibre is ready to play its part, connecting more than 20% of the market in that time," commented Greg Mesch, CEO at CityFibre.

"Full fibre network infrastructure is fast becoming the

next essential utility, underpinning the UK's competitiveness on a world stage.

"As we continue to scale at pace, Steve is positioned to support us, providing deep insight into the challenges of delivering national infrastructure programmes and bringing his experience of operating a national utility to bear."

Holliday added: "The UK is undergoing a digital infrastructure revolution with full fibre roll out well underway.

"As we have seen in other utility industries, the emergence of new players has greatly improved outcomes for consumers and is the key catalyst for a more vibrant and innovative market."

Extreme's R&D plan in Ireland

EXTREME Networks has kicked off plans to develop a next generation cloud portal for network applications and services, and an AI-based security system for the IoT, with a 3m euro R&D investment in Shannon, Ireland.

The move will create 20 new jobs in engineering, data science and software engineering over the next two years, with the Irish government providing additional funding in the form of a research, development and innovation grant worth over 500k euros.

The R&D base forms part of a strategy that will create a number of engineering jobs in the region over the next five years; and is Extreme Networks' next step in building a new Cloud and AI Centre of Excellence.

"The solutions they develop will be on the cutting edge of cloud and AI-based network solutions," said Liam Kiely, VP of Product Strategy.



Liam Kiely

Shipping fleets get smarter

PANGEA is claiming to be the first connectivity provider to enable smart container fleets following partnerships with Israel-based Loginno, a technology provider to shipping companies, and Leeds business The One Solution.

"Replacing a standard container vent with adaptive connected sensors gives supply chain operators visibility of the cargo at all times, so they can track missing goods, anticipate delays and take measures to protect delicate cargo," stated Dan Cunliffe, Pangea's MD.

"Ports, terminals, insurance companies and even homeland security will be able to use the tech to monitor cargo and make decisions based on analytics."

Having trialled the solution at Loginno's headquarters in Tel Aviv the world's first smart container fleet is set to launch with Log-In, a South American logistics company next year.

"As with all IoT applications this is just the beginning," commented Cunliffe. "It opens up avenues such as building smart ships, connecting ports and more."

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Limitless by design

Master chef plates up for Focus Group

NOT many people working in the ICT industry enjoy a chef cooked meal every day, but it's an experience staff at Focus Group are relishing.

On the top floor of its new headquarters in Shoreham, Sussex, owners Ralph Gilbert and Chris Goodman have installed a purpose built canteen called The Hut from where top chef Stuart MacGarvie serves up culinary delights for staff members every working day. A rooftop terrace is on hand for alfresco dining in good weather.

MacGarvie, Chris Goodman's brother, has been in the restaurant trade since he was 16, working in boutique bistros,



Chris Goodman and Stuart MacGarvie at The Hut

private dining, gastro pubs, suburban brasseries, independent healthcare, event catering and a stint in contract catering.

"I've been lucky enough to win a couple of competitions and cooked for royalty and their entourages along the way, and I've built up some great teams

and trained chefs to take on their own kitchens," he said.

"I jumped at the chance to work with Chris and we now cater for all needs, delivering great quality food while ticking as many boxes as possible.

"We'll use local suppliers wherever possible and serve up simple enjoyable food."

Focus researched local prices to make sure The Hut is competitive, as Goodman explained: "We completed 'beat the street' style research on the pricing and availability of food and drink.

"While we won't be looking to make a profit, we still need to ensure we're offering top quality refreshments at a better price than staff would find locally.

"Any profit will be rolled back into events and theme days for our teams to enjoy. The busier we are, the more events we'll be able to stage!"

Dedicated biz centres add clout

WESTCON-Comstor has boosted its EMEA Collaboration and Cyber Security business with the launch of two supportive go-to-market centres.

"The collaboration market is at an inflection point and it's essential to establish a dedicated business unit with go-to-market specialisation for vendors and partners," commented Westcon International COO David Grant.

"This will be complemented by additional resources, digital capabilities and a focus on emerging vendors and business models. We are also strengthening our Cyber Security business unit through more resources and new sales teams while increasing go-to-market engagement with a number of emerging and niche security vendors."

Marianne Nickenig is to head the Collaboration & Networking unit. She previously led Westcon's Collaboration and Digital Transformation business across DACH and Eastern Europe.

Daniel Hurel will lead the new Cyber Security and Next Generation Solutions go-to-market division. He joined Westcon-Comstor in 2001 and has held several leadership roles in the security practice.

NEWS ROUNDUP

VIDEO case studies on the benefits of UC reflect growing demand for end user visual marketing material and more effectively showcase resellers and their propositions, according to the video's maker Pragma. Will Morey, Sales and Marketing Director, said: "Over 70% of customers prefer to learn about a product by way of video. These case studies are an impactful way of demonstrating the benefits of Ericsson-LG's UC system."

SAP solutions provider Vision33 is acquiring UK SAP player B1 Systems. Both companies are SAP Business One data specialists. Privately owned Vision33 was formed over 25 years ago and has offices in six countries in Europe and North America. Its MD Neil Feingold said: "The acquisition adds talent and two new UK office locations."

CMI has doubled in size following the acquisition of London-based MSP BTA. The deal was funded by Panoramic Growth Equity and boosts CMI's turnover to more than £11m and staff numbers to 100. The company operates out of bases in Belfast, London and Maidenhead. CMI MD Ken Roulston stated: "The acquisition will create a stronger IT service provider."

KUBENET has renewed its sponsorship of professional rugby club Glasgow Warriors in a deal that sees the Pro 14 league team's Platinum Club re-branded as Club KubeNet.



KubeNet also supports grassroots rugby and sponsors the club's Mini Festivals, while also sponsoring the 'Defender of the Week' award during the 2018/19 campaign. KubeNet Director Julie Inglis said: "It's great to see additional benefits to the Club KubeNet package, which provides Warriors fans with a relaxed, friendly environment during home games." Pictured (left to right): Glasgow Warriors player Stafford McDowall; Scottish broadcaster Hugh Dan MacLennan; Julie Inglis and Glasgow Warriors Captain Callum Gibbins.



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Telecoms law firm in expansion mode

THE role of the law in greasing the wheels of the nation's full fibre and 5G roll outs has been underscored by the expansion of Trenches, a legal eagle specialising in the comms sector.

The wayleave and telecoms law specialist, which was founded two years ago, witnessed 300% growth in 12 months and forecasts a 500% hike in turnover in its next financial year.

These climbing figures are reflective of the transformation under way in the telecoms sector which is driving demand for outsourced wayleave services, according to Trenches head honcho Sharon McDermott, a lawyer with almost 20 years industry experience.

"The UK still lags behind many of our European neighbours when it comes to full fibre coverage, but with Government targets for the majority of the population to be covered by 5G by 2027, we are seeing the country's FTTP infrastructure now evolving faster than ever before," stated McDermott.

"This is not only a world we know a lot about, but one I am passionate about, not least because I was involved in Virgin's Project Lightning. I saw first-hand the challenges



Terry Daniell and Sharon McDermott

that operators face in both urban and rural areas, and this was the reason for setting up Trenches.

"I want to share our experience and legal acumen so that Trenches can help operators build as many premises as possible, whether they need to rely on the Electronic Communications Code or not."

Trenches' clients include TalkTalk, WightFibre, toob and Virtual1. It also acts as a legal specialist for firms such as Luminet.

The company has just opened its third office in Odiham, north Hampshire, adding to existing bases in east Hampshire and the Isle of Wight. As part of its expansion Trenches has appoint-

ed Terry Daniell as Operations Director to oversee the strategic acquisition of wayleaves. His experience includes a total of 25 years working for Virgin and BT.

McDermott added: "The world of tech is complex and multi-layered, and sometimes it's important to know when to push boundaries.

"Whether we're managing disputes, reviewing tenders or negotiating contract terms, our focus is to maximise revenue while minimising risk.

"Clients need legal counsel that helps them approach every problem or opportunity strategically, so they can keep moving in this fast-paced environment."

Acquisitive Enreach in fresh buy

SWYX and Centile owner Enreach has advanced its campaign to become the biggest UC player in Europe with the acquisition of comms and IT service provider Crystal Networks in the Netherlands.

Backed by pan-European investment company Waterland, Enreach has combined Crystal Networks with Eazit, the Dutch business comms provider acquired in April 2018.

"The focus of Crystal Networks on long-term customer relationships together with its additional and specialist knowledge in the field of telephony, IT and Internet, contribute to strengthening propositions that will benefit both the indirect and direct business of Enreach in the future," said Stijn Nijhuis, CEO of Enreach.



Stijn Nijhuis

NEWS ROUNDUP

SWCOMMS has been awarded a place on two lots of the CCS Network Services 2 RM3808 framework – local connectivity services and traditional telephony services. Sales Director Sarah Flowers said: "This represents a real area of growth for the business and builds on our expertise in delivering solutions to public, voluntary and charity sectors."

M247 has completed its third full fibre city network bringing ultrafast connectivity to more Manchester businesses. The project is part of a wider expansion programme across M247's UK and international networks, totalling a seven figure investment. M247 also owns full fibre access networks in London and Leeds and is planning to roll out further city networks in Liverpool and Birmingham within this financial year.

PANASONIC has launched its first software business comms system, the KX-NSV300, targeted at organisations with 10-300 users. Carlos Osuna, Head of Business Unit at Panasonic Communications Solutions, said: "The KX-NSV300 system is an important next step in our on-premises or virtual cloud offering."



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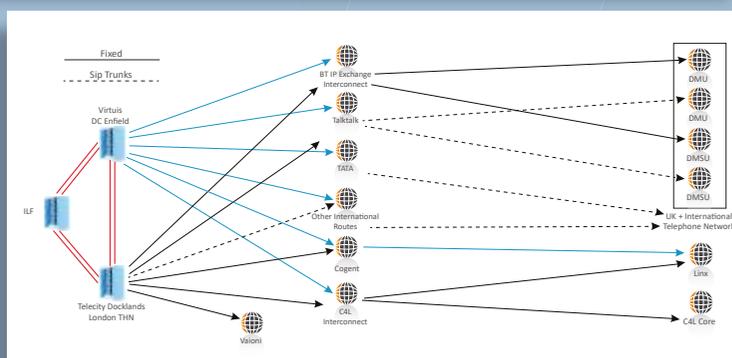


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NEWS ROUNDUP

FULL fibre infrastructure provider CityFibre has launched a City Champion programme through its wholesale business Entanet. The move aims to reward partners that put CityFibre's full fibre solutions at the core of their sales and marketing strategy. City Champion partners gain closer collaboration with Entanet.

PANASONIC has joined forces with Blueface to create its first integrated cloud comms platform, UC-Line. The service is currently available in France and Spain via Panasonic's channel partner network. A roll out to other European markets is planned for early 2020.

A £6.3M funding deal from Santander UK enables comms software provider Invosys to consolidate its lender portfolio and loans and more sharply focus on its expansion plans. Invosys, which was established in 2006 by Rob Booth and Peter Crooks, wholesales its own cloud communications software and platform. Booth, CEO, commented: "The funding will allow us to focus clearly on delivering our growth strategy and hitting our goals." Knight Corporate Finance acted as an advisor in the deal.

Nicely done growth plan



Chris Lee

SUNDERLAND-based Nice Network, which rebranded from CCS a little over a year ago, has reported a £1.2m revenue boost following a string of client wins.

The family run business was formed in 1986 by MD Chris Lee. Today, Nice Network manages telecoms and IT services for global blue chip organisations ranging from Nike to Husqvarna, Draeger, Puma and Russell Hobbs.

Technology partners include Vodafone, SOTI and Cisco. They underpin a range of new products and services delivered to market by Nice Network over the past 12 months, such as IoT and new cyber security solutions and IT services.

"Nice Network continued its growth last year, reporting

record results and securing a number of new clients," said Lee. "To have achieved this in the year we underwent a brand overhaul is fantastic."

Nice Network's team of 24 share an average of 10.4 years per person working for the business. Lee credits the firm's high staff retention rate to a strong company culture that also feeds into an average client tenure of over 13 years.

"Over the next 12 months we'll continue to look out for new products and services to introduce into our offering and, as we continue to invest in increasing our headcount, we're confident that the new brand will gain greater strength."

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Cloudbox addresses key sector

AN IT SOLUTION fashioned for the financial sector, which comes with unlimited fixed price support, has been launched by Cloudbox Technology.

The Cloudbox Financial solution includes tools to aid hedge funds, asset managers and other financial organisations facing regulatory and compliance demands.

Justin Trent, Global CEO, stated: "We are providing a set of policies, processes, documentation and GDPR platforms to help financial clients satisfy their investors and regulators."

Trent also noted that the solution is designed to eliminate single points of failure and has data encryption, 24/7 security scanning and archiving built in.

UK CEO Nick Goodenough commented: "Cloudbox Financial is based on best-of-breed cloud solutions so our clients never get stuck with legacy systems. It is also backed up by a Service Level Agreement."



Nick Goodenough

NEWS ROUNDUP

AN INTEGRATED AI-based digital assistant for network, security and application optimisation has been launched by Masergy. Called AIOps, the digital assistant acts as a virtual engineer embedded into Masergy's Intelligent Service Control customer portal, supporting the administration and optimisation of global software defined networks. Chris MacFarland, Executive Chairman and CTO of Masergy, said: "We expect to deliver fully autonomous networking to global enterprises in the next few years, and the launch of AIOps moves us in the direction of our vision."

MAINTEL'S interim results for the six months to 30th June 2019 saw revenue down 3% to £64.5m (H1 2018: £66.5m) with recurring revenue at 69% (H1 2018: 70%) and gross margin at 29% (H1 2018: 27%). The company also announced that CEO Eddie Buxton will leave at the end of the year. He joined the business in 2009. Maintel's transition to a cloud and managed services business continues with revenues from cloud and software customers now at £13m, 20% of revenue (H1 2018: 15% of revenue). Cloud UCaaS seats increased 32% to circa 66,000 (H1 2018: 50,000).

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Darwen puts energy in Redwood growth

BLACKPOOL based Redwood Group offers a bespoke business service which initially started off in the mobile industry, but has since grown into several other areas, including Insurance Services and Hosted Telephony.

“We have been in mobile for over 20 years and our main partners are Plan.com and Chess giving us the ability to service our clients with all networks. In addition, this year has seen us add Business Insurance to our portfolio in partnership with Movo to offer bespoke cover across business, health, fleet and life Insurance. We see ourselves as a key supplier to all our clients and it makes sense to have a wide portfolio of products which, together with our exceptional customer service, means we can be a one stop shop for them” explained Managing Director Fred Darwen.

“We were introduced to Fidelity Energy at an event in 2018 and it was just what we were looking for. Once we had a demonstration of their bespoke Ambolt Portal we knew immediately that it fitted in perfectly with our other business solutions, giving our existing and new customers a way to save time and ENERGY! It was straight forward and simple to implement.

“As we all know it is vital to keep running costs as low as possible and this is where we aim to help all of our clients.

Darwen says that adding energy to the company’s

offering has in no way been a distraction to its core offering and Fidelity’s Relationship Manager, Jason Fernyhough, eased any concerns and got things off the ground with lots of help and advice.

“The support team at Fidelity are great and we have a day-to-day contact to assist us with anything we need. Furthermore, they have prepared bespoke marketing material for us and given us all the tools to be successful.

“The journey so far has been great. We are renewing customers’ energy now on a daily basis. The portal produces clear and concise quotations for our clients, making it easy for them to see the whole picture, which in turn makes it easy for us to lock in deals.”

And, as Darwen stressed, a shared passion for doing good deals is key to the company’s ongoing success in the energy business.

“We believe here at The Redwood Group that integrity is the key to success in signing contracts. Fidelity Energy share our passion for doing great deals with excellent service. One of the most encouraging signs is that we have seen a big upturn in customer referrals due to this new service, which is developing our pipeline further.

“We are delighted that this project has been a success and we are looking forward to a long and fruitful partnership with Fidelity Energy.”



“We believe here at The Redwood Group that integrity is the key to success in signing contracts.”
Fred Darwen, Managing Director Redwood Group

Yorkshire censures ISDN scare tactics

YORKSHIRE Telecom has condemned the use of scare tactics and misinformation as a lever to press customers into connectivity upgrades ahead of the ISDN switch-off.

Speaking at a discussion forum hosted by 9 Group, Yorkshire Telecom Director Rachel Rowling said: “Scare tactics do nothing for our industry.”

Adam Berry, Head of Operations and Growth at the Wakefield-based reseller, added: “Customers are getting bombarded with calls. There’s a lot of scare tactics and miscommunication. We’re taking a different approach. We’re giving customers the right information and selling on the benefits of newer connectivity.

“If you give the best advice at the right time and let people make their own decisions you can’t go wrong. Furthermore, using technical language and acronyms does not work. We’re rewarded for explaining changes in much clearer terms.”

Rowling admits that call minutes revenues are diminish-



Adam Berry

ing but Yorkshire Telecom is replacing lost minutes business by selling multiple products in an informative way.

“SIP and cloud voice give us stability as we don’t need to focus on minutes,” she said.

Adam Cathcart, MD of 9 Group’s Partner Division, highlighted the opportunity for partners to hold positive customer conversations and drive sales of next generation solutions.

“Partners need to take their customers on a journey by preparing them for the switch off and by providing educational

content around how modern solutions can benefit their business,” he explained.

“In doing this, partners can build trust and support their customers through what could otherwise be a confusing time.”

Cathcart noted that 9 Group helps partners to prepare for positive engagements via a number of initiatives such as dedicated management and campaigns that educate and inform without scaremongering.

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Top performance secures 4net growth management accolade

ORGANIC growth, a string of landmark deal wins, an increasing headcount and a stand out overall business performance secured 4net Technologies the Growth Management Team of the Year gong at the British Venture Capital Association’s (BVCA) North West Awards.

4net MD Richard Pennington said: “Our contribution to the UK economy has been recognised during what has been an extremely tricky time for small businesses like ours.”

Manchester-based 4net now has 90 employees and revenue of £26.5m, an increase of



Richard Pennington (left) and Grant Thornton Partner Neil Robinson

more than a third over the last year. “We have been working to ensure that our staff are able to excel in their fields and continue to help us grow, and that has been recognised by our peers

and the judges at the BVCA,” added Pennington. “We have high hopes for the coming year, despite the Brexit worries that many businesses like ours are currently experiencing.”

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Zen's Stobart throws down

Ambitious Zen CEO Paul Stobart is stepping up plans to realise what he claims is a gold-plated opportunity for his new 'challenger brand' and its channel partners.

Rochdale-based Zen has long been admired as a masterpiece of connectivity provision, but Stobart's frame of mind now rests squarely on transformational growth. His stated objectives include doubling revenues within five years and ramping up Zen as a challenger brand across its market segments – all a sign of the ISP's evolving maturity. More to the point, ultrafast offers a high-speed opportunity for Zen and the channel, and following a period of preparatory work Stobart has pressed the go button on ultrafast and other expansion plans. "Over the past two years we have been preparing for more ambitious growth than ever before – unbundling exchanges, refreshing our network, while investing in people and talent," stated Stobart. "We are poised to take advantage of the opportunities that lie ahead."



Paul Stobart

Over the past two years we have been preparing for more ambitious growth than ever before – unbundling exchanges, refreshing our network, while investing in people and talent

In the present context of Digital Britain, this can only lead in one direction – next generation connectivity. "We're a pioneer in the provision of ultrafast technologies, which is of great interest to channel partners and customers," added Stobart. "Ultrafast is the future, which is why we have invested heavily in our infrastructure, capacity, and the capability of the network, to prepare the ground for the ultrafast generation. We are one of the few players that offer such propositions to the channel and wholesale partners, and intend to

remain at the forefront of the ultrafast world."

Competitive gameplan

Among the trump cards that are heavily on the side of Zen's gameplan, noted Stobart, is a commitment to be far more competitive

on price. "For channel and wholesale partners, our view is that we need to become as competitive as anyone else in terms of price, and differentiate with our service wrap," he explained. "We are seeing the benefits of this approach having recruited

25 new wholesale partners during the last 12 months, and we are witnessing strong growth in customer numbers. These gains are in large part due to the way we behave and how we present ourselves to the marketplace. We always

stand by our promises and deliver on what we say."

Zen currently generates circa £75 million annual revenues and aims to hit £150 million by 2024. Such is the chemistry of his growth plan that Stobart reaffirmed his intent to make swift progress in the residential market, the channel (through reseller partners and wholesale partners), the mid-market and enterprise – as a robust and ever advancing challenger brand with ultrafast a core component of the battle plan. "Zen is also committed to being an infrastructure player and has already unbundled 450 exchanges," added Stobart. "Our objective takes that number to 700 exchanges which will give us a strong footprint in fibre."

The prize here for Zen is significant. It has activated a multi-faceted 'shake up the industry' campaign which is already yielding results, and Stobart has moved decisively to unlock Zen's full potential, and that of the growing markets in which it serves. "They are full of opportunity," he enthused. "We have a shift to ultrafast, exponential growth in cloud-based services, and much more besides. The challenge for a provider like ourselves is to work out where we're going to play, where we can really add value, and where we can resonate most with customers. For us, it is around connectivity, communication and computing. Our focus is to take these various technologies and shape

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own the gauntlet

innovative and competitively priced propositions.”

Behind the strategy lies the hand of Stobart's deft management skills. He joined Zen as Chairman in December 2017 and switched roles with former CEO and company founder Richard Tang in August last year. As with previous roles, most notably as Sage's boss, Stobart's handling of big schemes and people has been, and continues to be, admirable. The crux, says Stobart, is that 'everything starts with leadership'. "Well led and

These gains are in large part due to the way we behave and how we present ourselves

engaged people translate into a great experience for customers," noted Stobart.

It is clear that Zen's people feel the influence of good guidance and great leadership. And as he set out his plans Stobart reflected on the roots of his capacity to lead effectively and cohere a workforce around shared objectives. "I've spent the bulk of my career in the technology sector, starting out in business software with Sage," he explained. "Then in financial services, healthcare and now telecoms with Zen. For a large part of my career I thought the best way to progress was to tell people what to do. It took

me a long time to realise that this approach is flawed. Listening, appreciating and encouraging people to take responsibility and do things for themselves delivers far better results. Inspired leadership can move organisations to different places. But it requires a team of leaders who all believe in the power of people to effect change."

Stobart champions astute leadership and displays a great ability to grasp strategic decisions and take them, which is a useful attribute given the task ahead. "Our main challenge right now is to start delivering on our strategic plan," he explained. "There are five elements to that: Firstly, the people agenda. We have to continue to nurture, develop and recruit talent. The second is around infrastructure. We've already unbundled 450 exchanges, have a further 250 to unbundle, while a network refresh plan will enhance capacity across our network.

"Thirdly, we are refreshing our systems stack with new generation technology that enables us to scale much more quickly and deliver the enhanced customer experience that our channel partners and customers require. In terms of the fourth strand, the customer experience, we're working hard behind the scenes to improve every interaction point we have with partners and customers. Last but not least, we have introduced more energy, colour and dynamism to the Zen branded offering and our website. We're now making sure we deliver on these strategic initiatives while staying true to our values." ■

Just a minute with Paul Stobart...

Role model: Nelson Mandela was an extraordinary leader with amazing patience, tolerance and understanding, subjugated to the most intense pressures and yet retained resilience, dignity and humility to become one of the greatest leaders ever

What talent do you wish you had? I am better at ideation, creativity and innovation but not so talented at 'completing finishing'

Tell us something about yourself we don't know: I was a policeman for a couple of years

Name three ideal dinner guests: As I'm from Newcastle, football legends Bobby Robson and Alan Shearer; and cricketer Ben Stokes

What do you fear the most? I'm not afraid of many things. I love a challenge, embrace difficulty and complexity. But what my generation is doing to the planet is worrying

Best advice you have ever been given: Listening is way more powerful than talking

Industry bugbear? Acronyms. We must simplify the language we use so customers better understand what they are buying

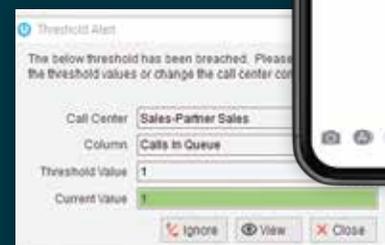
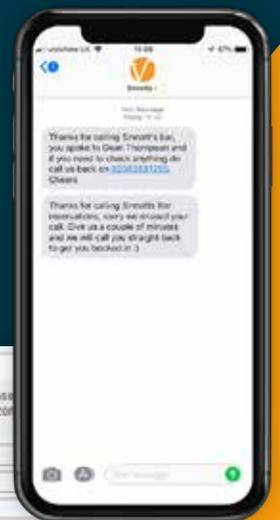
If you weren't in comms what would you be doing? Helping my wife bring up our two sets of teenage twin girls. I don't know how she does it

Top tip for resellers? Don't underestimate the power of great leadership. It helps people in any organisation feel inspired, nurtured and developed



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Swedish UCaaS top gun

A Nordic-made UCaaS proposition will quickly gain market share across the UK and Europe's northern territories as its creator, Soluno Business Communications, presses the go button on an expansive partner recruitment campaign.

Domination across the UK and Europe's northern territories remains an obsession of CEO Mattias Ohde, who, to his credit, has shown strong leadership and determination to substantially build on the company's UCaaS market leadership in Sweden. "We see ourselves in three to four years time as the Number One provider of UCaaS for service providers in northern Europe," he stated. "We're now one of the leading UCaaS providers in the cloud, heading towards 200,000 seats."

Expressing his UCaaS ambitions in terms of speed-to-market and ongoing acceleration Ohde falls a whisker short of impatience in his desire to catalyse sluggish cloud markets. "We're in the middle of a new launch of services and aim to be an integral part of cloud development," he added. "The focus is on pushing our ethos and proposition to markets that are not as cloud-mature as the Nordics, leading with cloud and mobile and doing that well."

"We work with several partners in Europe including Trust in the UK and are seeking new collaborations with SIP and mobile carriers. We are also looking for new collaborations with SIP and mobile carriers. The number of partners isn't the most crucial aspect, we'd rather work with the right ones."



Mattias Ohde

The focus is on pushing our ethos and proposition to markets that are not as cloud-mature as the Nordics

The reality is that UCaaS providers are in a race with each other in this market theatre – and whether they reach their objectives depends on how quickly

they move. "Resellers need to be brave," added Ohde. "The ones that can let go of the past and put their effort and power into the future will take a great advantage

from that. You can't be successful with one foot on the brake. There's no time for that. If you move fast you'll secure a strong position as a cloud provider. UCaaS will

grow by more than three million seats every year, so the potential is huge."

A line of strategy that will help to realise this potential is an open source mindset, noted Ohde. "Instead of trying to compete on all fronts in collaboration, for example, we integrate with other services such as Microsoft Teams or Salesforce," he added. "A buzzing trend is the popularisation of collaboration tools which in turn leads to better integrations with UCaaS. We offer integration with plenty of CRM systems and just released integration with Microsoft Teams. The goal is to offer solutions that work on all units, across all carriers, and can be integrated with an abundance of CRM systems."

Mobility matters

The longer term casualties of the market will be the demise of stick in the mud resellers wedded to traditional technology. They will become ever more bruised and battered and polarised from the cloud-focused agencies of empowered mobility. "Everything will be even more mobile driven, and customers will have much higher demands on B2B tools," commented Ohde. "Things need to be as easy to use as many consumer products and, in the end, you will really need to make all services run and work on one common interface. If

targets the UK

you're stuck trying to defend old techniques or business models you'll lose. The power of the market is too strong – it's about the customer experience going forward."

Soluno Business Communications currently has 101 employees and generated almost £20 million revenue in 2018. Ohde expects to see 15 per cent organic growth driven by increases in user numbers. The customer base is primarily enterprise clients and indirect partner channels. But the strength of Soluno Business Communications' proposition also lies in its rooting in Sweden and in the

If you're stuck trying to defend old techniques or business models you will lose

dynamics of its formation just a short time ago. In January 2017 SolusBC and Uno Telephony joined forces to create Soluno Business Communications, which claims to be the largest carrier independent UCaaS supplier in the Nordic market, and the first company in Sweden to set-up cloud PBX infrastructure.

Uno Telefoni was founded in 2004 by Andreas Grindelius and Johan Wogel, who ran the company up to the joint venture. They retain key positions in the organisation and remain co-owners. SolusBC was established in 2008 by Martin Norling and Joachim Brandt to

offer carrier-independent technology services in the Swedish market. Norling and Brandt also retain key positions in the joint company. "We've been doing cloud business since 2007 and never looked back or tried to defend something from the past," stated Ohde. "Since the merger we've doubled the customer base; and having no big backpack to carry keeps us moving forward fast. It's important not to slow down and we're challenging ourselves and the market every day. Our UCaaS cloud platform is augmented by the full stack of services, including tools for deployment and support, self-service portals and billing – all with a white label option if required."

The language of speed and catalysing change in the market all feature heavily not just in Ohde's strategic discourse but also in the course of his career moves. "I used to work for one of the big telcos in Sweden but saw that I wanted to move much faster into the future and also make a difference," he said. "My previous work has of course come in handy in knowing what not to do. I took everything that the big telcos did, and did it the other way around.

"Our motto now is 'Driving the future of business communications', and when it comes to innovation we try to be one step ahead with a full concept offering that builds on the transformation of the ICT industry – characterised by more cloud with faster and better mobile networks and Internet connections. We need a good highway to provide cloud-based services – the rest is up to us." ■

Just a minute with Mattias Ohde...

Role model: Morgan Freeman is a great guy

What talent do you wish you had? Paul McCartney's song writing skills

Tell us something about yourself we don't know: I'm a great singer

Your ideal dinner guests and why you would invite them? The four members of ABBA to trick them into a comeback performance

What do you fear the most? The more we expand, the more is at risk. Being a risk taker doesn't come without fear, but it's equally uncomfortable as it's motivating

Best advice you have ever been given: Why wait until tomorrow?

One example of something you have overcome: The need for eight hours sleep. Sleep is overrated

What could you gladly do without in your job? Email – it's yesterday's communication tool

Biggest career achievement to date? To grow something from scratch to what we've created today

What possession could you not live without? My Gibson J200 Acoustic Guitar

In hindsight: I perhaps could have run even faster and taken more risks

How do you relax when not working? I don't see a clear line between work and spare time. For me it's a constant mix, but there needs to be a balance of course

Top tip for resellers? If you want to succeed or take a new position, let go of the old stuff and go forward at full throttle

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Taylor talks strategy



A more critical period for the industry cannot be recalled, but the current upheaval creates not just a disruption of core traditional communications, it provides a welter of opportunities for a strengthening comms channel, according to Gamma CEO Andrew Taylor.

From the moment Taylor took over from former Gamma CEO Bob Falconer in May last year he began to prepare the business for the next phase of its development on a number of fronts, with plans for product and service development, more comprehensive partner support programmes and a push on European expansion. Indeed, analysis of Taylor's discourse shows a near obsession with the channel as an engine of growth, and he lauds its capacity to be the driving power of digital transformation.

"The channel has disrupted the market, taken significant share from the incumbents and driven technological change in our industry," he stated. "Take the move to VoIP and cloud – UK penetration levels are the highest in Europe. The channel is the driving force behind a market shift towards SIP and cloud telephony, with 10 per cent and 20 per cent annualised growth respectively."

According to Taylor, BT's ISDN switch off is both an opportunity and a threat, and on this he issued a word to

the wise. "Partners should remain vigilant about their existing base, ensuring they are moving their customers onto next generation solutions," he urged. "I am convinced that the channel will be a driving force. This transformation will not be easy, but once on the journey it radically changes a channel partners' business model and significantly enhances the value of their organisation."

New dawn

On UCaaS, Taylor envisages another new dawn of opportunity. "UCaaS has become a key component in the digital journeys organisations have embarked on as they seek to gain a competitive advantage in their own markets," he stated. "The channel, which has largely secured the SIP market, is primed to lead the UCaaS charge over the next five years, providing a network enabled service to business customers. This gives partners a competitive edge against the over-the-top players."

In the context of mobile and data markets it is true that the overall growth for data is flat, and that the

Continued on page 26



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Continued from page 24

national upgrade to new fibre-based broadband services is having a negative impact on revenues and margins across the industry, observed Taylor. "That said, it's encouraging to see that the channel continues to outperform and remain competitive when selling data products, regardless of their similar feature set and purchasing decisions being heavily influenced by price," added Taylor.

"We would advise caution on the opportunity in the data market as it becomes a race to the floor on price, ultimately adding no value."

As with portfolio development, Taylor's overall handling of opportunities for Gamma and its partners has been deft and also displays optimism in the face of market challenges. "Differentiation and a strong value proposition are essential to overcoming the threats faced by the channel," he stated. "Customers can buy almost all services digitally, so partners need to scope out where their value lies to remain relevant, looking beyond products to the experience provided to a

user, team, business and customer. Furthermore, with new entrants to the market, including the larger US players, it's essential to choose partnerships carefully by asking the key question, 'will they add or destroy the value of my business?'. For these new entrants their opportunity is the channel's margin, and over time they will look to marginalise channel partners and go direct."

Will to win

It cannot be too much to imagine the channel stepping up its challenge to the incumbents and winning, claims Taylor, who explained how Gamma has been ratcheting up its own mechanisms to prepare partners for their market campaigns. "We have worked hard to meet our short-term commitments while planning for the longer-term strategy," commented Taylor. "Gamma has a clear set of objectives and priorities to support the channel."

"Personally, I have spent much time with channel partners to understand where we should be placing our efforts. This approach, for



Andrew Taylor

Partner business models have dramatically changed with recurring revenues and the move to SaaS

example, has enabled us to address our deliverables on Horizon while ensuring that we launched Collaborate, our first step in becoming a full UCaaS provider and a significant milestone. We also introduced our subscription management service and

will shortly roll out a new Horizon voice recording platform and cloud contact centre solution, which will be fully integrated into Horizon and is being provided by our partner Cirrus."

Taylor's tactics are clear – to change up a gear not only on home turf but also abroad. "We are on plan with our international expansion strategy and have already made a couple of acquisitions in the Netherlands," he explained. "Our long-term focus is to develop a presence in key European markets where cloud penetration is low – under five per cent compared to 24 per cent in the UK – and we have ring fenced a dedicated team focused on our European business so there is no distraction from the important work we are doing in the UK."

As we have seen, Taylor's broader UK channel plan involves a heavy investment into products and services which comes with a strong emphasis on ensuring the

integrity of Gamma's network and application platforms via a governance structure which is audited by external specialists. Another core message is that Gamma's focus is not particularly around increasing the partner base but more around strengthening current partner relationships.

"We have invested heavily in the Gamma Academy and the Gamma Accelerate digital marketing platform with a view to better enabling our partners," said Taylor. "During the last 18 months we have also augmented the sales, marketing and commercial support. During the last six months, for example, we ran almost 12,000 training courses, an increase from 8,000 in the same period in 2018, and we are running over 350 marketing campaigns a month with partners. We have also increased the size of our channel sales team and structured it geographically to provide better and more local support to our partners."

Taylor, like his predecessor, has shown himself to be a chief champion of the UK channel, for good reason. "Despite Brexit I continue to be positive about the communications sector and our ability as an industry and a channel to show resilience during a period of economic uncertainty where business confidence is low," stated Taylor. "Historically, our industry has shown robustness and is well placed to ride out any eventualities, especially when you consider that the overall financial performance and business model of our partners has dramatically changed in the last 10 years with recurring revenues and the move to SaaS. I believe they are best in class when compared to other European countries. As well as working hard and being commercial in their dealings, the channel also finds time to have fun."

Andrew Taylor in profile...

Taylor has over 22 years experience in the telecoms sector and a strong track record of achievement in previous roles, both in the UK and internationally. From 2013 to 2017 Taylor was Chief Executive Officer of Nomad Digital, a provider of IP connectivity and digital solutions to the global transportation industry. He was responsible for establishing Nomad as a major player in the sector, and when acquired by Alstom in 2017 it served over 50 global customers from 20 offices.

Before joining Nomad, Taylor was Digicel's Regional Chief



Executive Officer (2012-2013) with responsibility for fixed and mobile operations across the Northern Caribbean. His remit included all fixed network services and business/ICT solutions within 26 international markets. Taylor is credited with driving significant

growth in both Digicel's revenues and profitability.

From 2008 to 2010 Taylor was Chief Executive of Intec Telecom, a provider of software solutions with over 400 customers located in 120 countries, and served by over 1,700 employees. After a period of significant growth and business improvement Intec was acquired by CSG in 2010.

In the period before 2008 Taylor held a number of management and operational roles across the telecoms industry including senior positions at Alcatel-Lucent and British Telecom.



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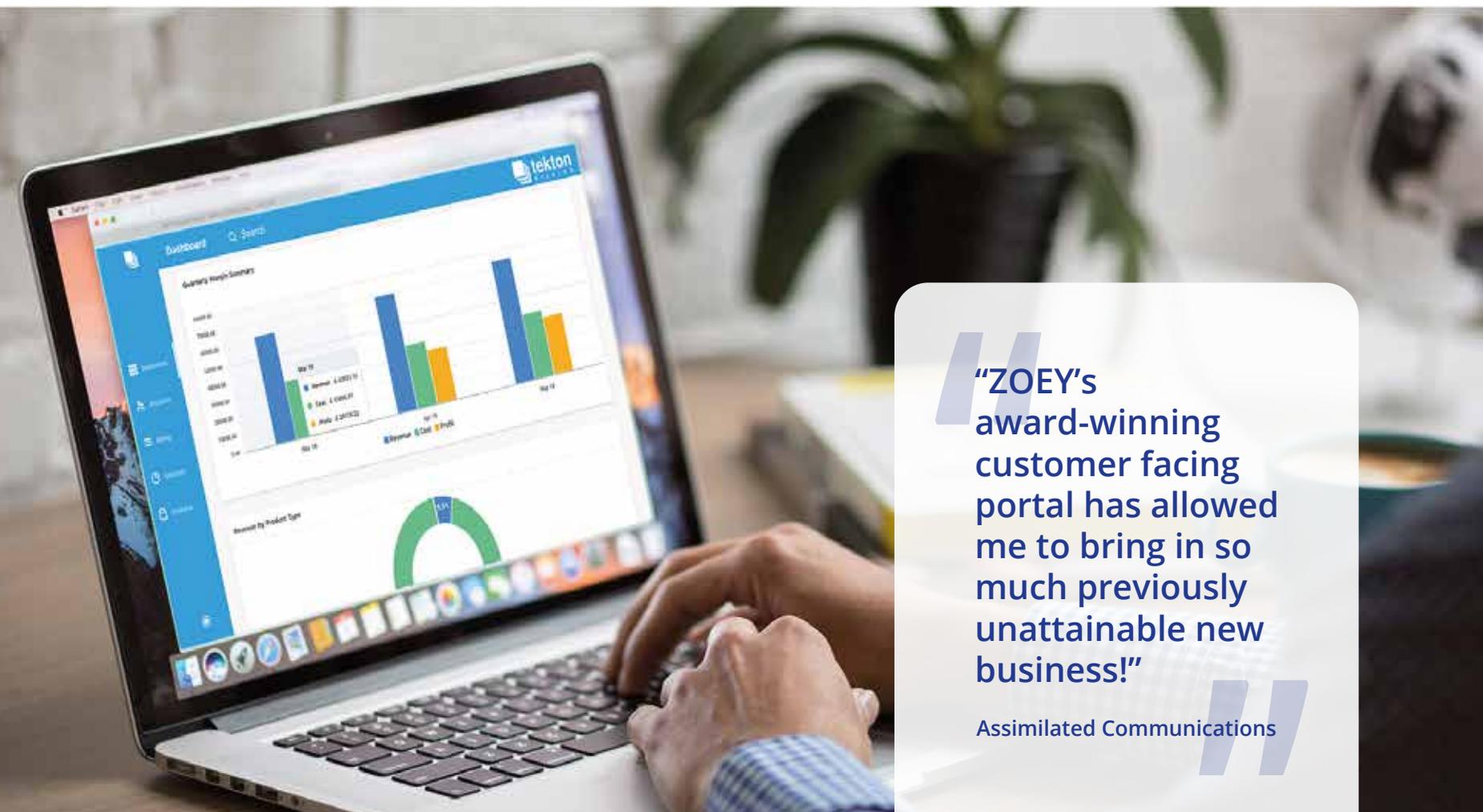
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Splicecom's iron maxims

The channel is most effective when deploying tactically developed products and propositions created for specific vertical markets, says Splicecom's Managing Director and CEO Barry Edwards, who holds fast to this iron maxim in all aspects of the vendor's solution planning, partner engagement and go-to-market strategies.



Barry Edwards

From the moment Edwards joined Splicecom as Managing Director in 2011 he brought to bear a telling influence characterised by a laser focus and the qualities of stability, adaptability, discernment and motivation, accrued through decades of experience ranging from technical, sales and business management primarily in converging industries. Edwards' career in technology kicked off with BT when hosted data services (timeshare) were being rolled out in the UK. His subsequent data networking experience includes a stint in the Middle East with Cable&Wireless before working in global markets for UK and US companies in advanced voice and data, WAN and multi-media LAN/WAN.

During this time Edwards developed a reputation for getting things done, but on one project his no fuss pragmatism almost caused an international incident. On a 10 day trip to Moscow in the 1980s his objective was to sell a datacoms network

to the Soviet Ministry of Gas, to connect the major maintenance depots on the Siberian gas pipeline that feeds into Europe. To tip the odds more in his favour Edwards wanted to design the WAN but officials refused to divulge crucial information about the available circuits.

"So I 'borrowed' their reference book, had all the town names translated and designed the network overnight," stated Edwards. "The next day a Ministry car driver transported me to the offices, but he circled Lubyanka Prison three times with a smile on his face. They knew what I had done! I then finalised a £1 million deal and opened the door for what proved to be a profitable market for the UK multiplexer manufacturer I worked for. But every visa application I have made since has been rejected."

Russia's loss is Splicecom's gain, and Edwards' no nonsense approach is now a boon to channel partners. The company only sells through the

We have invested heavily in the transformation of our portfolio development, embracing agile processes that enable us to identify the next wave of new features and third party integrations

channel – not direct nor through distribution. It works with long-term voice centric resellers, convergence focused IT resellers and service providers operating in clearly defined vertical markets.

"We have invested heavily in the transformation of our portfolio development and embrace agile processes that enable us to identify the next wave of new features and third party integrations," said Edwards. "This provides our channel with precise forward looking release

dates for fully featured, fully tested products. Our agile approach is also freeing us up to look more closely at outbound marketing."

Strong pedigree

Edwards' marketing and commercial know-how is reinforced by his multifaceted career experience and ability to adapt to any situation – all useful attributes to draw on when he took over the Splicecom reins. "I was asked to replace the founder after I rebuilt and sold a software business," explained Edwards. "I had

been collaborating with large consulting groups that were mentoring the newly formed Cloud Consortium, and accepted the Splicecom role after a hard look at the core technology it had developed, realising it was the foundation for truly harmonised and universal deployments of both on-premise and cloud IP voice with the potential of real multi-media communications for the UK SMB market. We are simple and low cost enough to replace hosted and small on-premise PBXs
Continued on page 30



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Cloud move pays growth dividends

Pragma is in great shape and adding muscle on all sides as an ever evolving channel focused CSP, according to Managing Director Tim Brooks and Sales and Marketing Director Will Morey. Established just seven years Pragma wasted no time in transforming from a distributor to cloud service provider and now plans to double revenues within four years building on 14 per cent growth this year. From the outset Pragma recognised the cloud telephony opportunity and in 2016 became the first country globally to launch Ericsson-LG's iPECS Cloud, now one of the fastest growing hosted UC platforms in the UK. "This year we expect over half of our revenues to be generated through our cloud service," stated Brooks. "The continued growth of our on-premise business, despite the purported decline across the industry, has also helped us to gain ground."

As Ericsson-LG's sole UK provider Pragma operates a policy of controlled distribution to ensure mutual benefit and avoid negative impacts on existing partners. Pragma targets owner managed, mid-sized reseller businesses that sell both on-premise and cloud-based comms solutions. And in a recent market survey it identified that over 94 per cent of partners expect to see significant growth over the next three years.

"Pragma is on track to help them get there supported by new portfolio additions, such as iPECS Cloud Mobile (iCM), a solution that embeds PBX functionality onto mobile



Tim Brooks and Will Morey

devices without the need for an app," added Morey.

"Our 'cupboard to cloud' proposition has given channel partners an advantage both in terms of impact to their business as well as their proposition to end user customers. This is evidenced by the continuous enhancements delivered through to Ericsson-LG's cloud platform and the launch of a new range of cloud-ready iPECS handsets in 2020. The iPECS products in our portfolio are interoperable and can be deployed across on-premise, cloud and hybrid environments."

In the pipeline

Pragma's roadmap is also centred on WebRTC. "This enables simple collaboration tools to be delivered to users and extended out of the enterprise making true UC far easier," said Brooks. "During 2020 Ericsson-LG will be launching its iPECS WebRTC application. We will also be introducing our cloud contact centre solution in the coming months and new provisioning tools to enable easy deployment of large cloud-based solutions."

Another important focus area is around what happens after end users make the move from ISDN to SIP. "While our channel partners have facilitated this move it has brought about a decline in their monthly billing revenues," noted Morey. "So we've introduced new bolt-on services and products to help boost recurring revenues. The launch of Web Listings is an example of how we've helped partners offer more value to their customers while adding up to £5 margin per customer location per month. In the first month of launch we had in excess of 5,000 subscribers and see this continuing to grow."

Pragma carried out research to identify the key business challenges faced by comms resellers, and then developed a series of video guides complete with industry insights to help overcome them. This, says, Brooks, is one example of Pragma's policy of 'simplificationism' in action. "The industry must move away from jargon and acronyms," added Brooks. "The tangible benefits that technologies bring to customers must be more easily understood."

Continued from page 28

through to nationwide multi-site installations taking over 60,000 calls a day, as well as global networks and NHS hospitals, all with the same products."

In 2013 Edwards decided to extract the software from the hardware and supply it for virtual machines and bespoke Linux servers using the same software for on-premise, private cloud and public cloud deployments whether single or multi-site. "Resellers can sell our hosted services or take the software and operate their own bespoke services, enabling them to improve their competitive differentiation," added Edwards.

Key capabilities

Splicecom's integrated Vision Call management, recording, reporting and call centre offering was developed in step with the core switching system and is now providing omni-channel capabilities through large multi-site and

being seen as must-have products," claimed Edwards. "Existing resellers are embracing the Select Voice proposition, and new vertical market resellers are being on-boarded and supported in a totally different way.

"We are currently working with some of the best known names in our industry as they recognise the power of our proposition. Deep level collaboration with best-of-breed manufacturers has resulted in seamless integrations; while product development for our key vertical markets is providing omni-channel operation for SMBs with integrated call management, recording and reporting."

Reflecting the highly focused and all encompassing nature of Splicecom's approach to product development, Edwards displays a particularly astute international perspective, a helicopter view that tells him the UK's IT and comms

Integrations will continue to play an important part of our growth as demand continues to grow exponentially

single site contact centre customers, integrating Skype for Business, Teams, web chat and social media. "These integrations meet the needs of 98 per cent of all opportunities our channel are working in," stated Edwards. "They will continue to play an important part of our growth as demand is growing exponentially."

He also noted that the release of Select Voice, which is based on Splicecom's flexible approach to providing a straightforward POS solution for all customer requirements whatever their IT strategy and financial preferences, is gaining traction and dwarfing previous product sales. "Our solutions are increasingly

industry is a poor contributor to the national good when measured against the balance of payments. "The vast majority of product is bought from the USA with China gaining slowly, resulting in a significant amount of the UK government and business ICT spend going overseas," he stated.

"The industry has become overly service dependent and we are not producing nor manufacturing, let alone exporting, technology to provide any balance to this drain on money. Without serious governmental support to inspire, motivate and legitimise important development work this will not change."



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V12's Rickett ratchets up

Resellers have no choice but to grasp the Teams opportunity, despite the perceived threat, argues V12 Telecom co-founder and Managing Director Charles Rickett.

The comms sector has witnessed a number of disruptions lately, and the industry is about to lock horns with another transformational technology – Microsoft Teams – believes Rickett. But while Teams is an obvious threat there is a clear upside, according to Rickett, and his next strategy is to drive the Teams opportunity to the limit. So important steps have been taken to launch Direct Routing, he says, a development that builds on big advances made in the cloud since Rickett led an MBO in 2016.

“The buyout enabled us to reposition the company and focus on cloud voice services,” he stated. “The autonomy allowed me to action requests from two oil and gas clients which both urgently required the benefits of Direct Routing. We developed a product to do this and are now rolling it out in the UK and internationally to a growing number of countries.”

What now matters is timing, and Rickett says V12 is on track to pull off a well timed Teams strategy, which in reality is a natural extension of the existing operation. “At heart we are a telecoms business focusing on cloud-based voice, hosted and SIP, mobile, connectivity via Ethernet and high-speed broadband,” he explained. “Our recent move into Direct Routing is an extension of this and I predict that it will rapidly become a significant part of V12 Telecom in



Charles Rickett

Teams is a serious threat to the hosted telephony market but resellers need to be aware of the opportunity

the coming months and years. The majority of our new business is brought to us by our IT reseller partners, so the adoption of Teams by them and their customers will inevitably produce increased sales.”

Many industry pundits continue to cast Teams solely as a major threat to the comms channel, but Rickett argues with far stronger

conviction the case for owner operators to leverage their innate opportunism at this pivotal moment. It is now clear that Teams is Microsoft's fastest ever selling application and is predicted to be one of the biggest disruptive technologies to date.

“Direct Routing is a relatively new product and it's not clearly understood by many in the industry, including the

CEOs of some IT resellers,” observed Rickett. “Teams is a serious threat to the hosted telephony market but resellers need to be aware of the opportunity it presents to provide them with ongoing revenue. I am aware of one American Venture Capital firm that has not only adopted Teams throughout their organisation globally, but they are also strongly encouraging the

companies in which they invest to do the same – the writing is on the wall.”

Voice of the future

Voice is fast becoming part of the chemistry of Teams, and one of Rickett's lead messages is that while not all Teams deployments currently require voice, a great many do and in his opinion these opportunities are being missed. “This results in lost

o Teams play

revenue for the reseller and a diminished product experience for the end user," he added. "It's important to partner with a Direct Routing supplier with the ability to process CDRs and rate calls via a billing platform and to provide monthly bills. This is not a case of billing a simple fixed price service, it also includes usage charges. Our cloud-based service with per user pricing and inclusive minutes gives us a great opportunity to gain significant market share."

Rickett firmly believes that comms resellers face a growing threat from their counterparts in the IT channel

The majority of our new business is brought to us by IT reseller partners

which continue to bond voice to Teams in growing numbers, and he urges telco players to follow suit and get on track with the times. Being on track comes naturally to Rickett who 'back in the day' was a National Formula 3 champion and a three-time competitor in the Le Mans 24 Hour race. "My background is motorsport sponsorship, so I had an amazing little black book and I understood rejection," he said. "Great contacts and a thick skin are both vital when starting out and looking for new clients."

V12 Telecom began its commercial life in December 1998 as an LCR business, moving into phone systems. "Since then we have lived

through all of the main industry changes such as line rental, broadband, hosted voice and now Direct Routing," commented Rickett. "Our larger clients with international reach might generate the most column inches, but we supply services to companies from as few as a handful of users upwards. Direct Routing is industry agnostic and can benefit SMEs just as much as international conglomerates."

Ahead of the game

As such, V12 Telecom, like many ICT providers, lives under the glare of ever higher expectations from all manner of organisations, so being ahead of the game is key to standing the weight of expectation. "I've always tried to keep an eye on the way that the market is moving and to work with people who are significantly brighter than me," added Rickett. "That way we can provide solutions using the best technology available. Our partnership with Highlight is a proofpoint of this approach. It provides network and application monitoring and reporting. We can also give customers access to their own secure area of the Highlight portal so can share the same view and information with them in real-time."

Rickett reaffirmed that Teams is not a threat, but reseller inaction towards it is, so he keeps a close eye on partners to ensure they are in pole position. "I personally oversee our partner programme and I'm keen to expand it," he stated. "Resellers play a key role in the market which is likely to grow in importance. Customers need to be properly informed on how to benefit from new and evolving technologies." ■

Just a minute with Charles Rickett...

Role model: When I was young my hero was Formula 1 racer James Hunt. He was blessed with incredible driving skills and well known for his good looks and charisma

What talent do you wish you had? Patience

Name three ideal dinner guests: James Hunt and Barry Sheene, two sporting icons who knew how to have a good time; and Joanna Lumley

What do you fear the most? Failure

Best advice you have ever been given: The line between tenacity and stubbornness is extremely fine

In hindsight: Getting our own Direct Debit facility in 1999 and focusing from the start on incremental monthly revenues as opposed to one-off sales were both wise decisions

If you weren't in comms what would you be doing? I can't imagine

One example of something you've overcome: The realisation that I was only good enough for the second XV at school

What's the greatest risk you have taken? Setting up V12 Telecom in 1998, but it didn't seem like a risk at the time

How do you relax when not working? Early morning walks and gardening with power tools

What possession could you not live without? Wine

Biggest career achievement? Starting a business in a sector in which I had no knowledge or experience, and being here over 20 years later

Top tip for resellers? Know your product



Dave Dadds

Continued from page 1

Latif acknowledges that progress is being made by Ofcom and NICC – the technical forum for the UK comms sector that develops interoperability standards for public communications networks and services – but is concerned over the lack of progress in organising a sector ownership and governance structure that will allow the industry to move together to acquire and operate the appropriate number portability and management solution before the 2025 switch off.

Strong start

"The number porting initiative from Ofcom gives industry a great start point to link all the related areas of numbers, including management, porting, interconnect, Exchange Database (EDB) and CLI authentication and, for the first time, look at these as ultimately a single system rather than individual silos," he said. "The FCS, within its white paper – UK Number Routing in an All IP World – has identified key areas that must be clarified and acted upon to ensure we have a process that offers a level playing field for industry going forward, and a flexible and competitive service for B2B and B2C."

According to the white paper the industry should own, fund and operate an independent Number Porting Organisation and Governance processes, with Ofcom oversight and a Number Management

Authority. The white paper also states that the Number Porting process should not offer a competitive advantage to any network operator, range holder or any other stakeholder. Another tenet is that the routing of traffic between all parties that want to participate is available to all with no competitive advantage given to any one company, group of companies or individuals.

"The system must be future proofed to allow for changes in the way that people and organisations may choose to communicate with each other in the future, whether for voice or data services," said Latif. "We call upon Ofcom to take the first step to mandate the telecoms industry to organise an ownership and governance structure that will allow the sector to acquire and operate an appropriate number portability and management solution before the 2025 switch off."

Dave Dadds, FCS Chair, stated: "It would not be unreasonable in the new world that the individual consumer or business end user, metaphorically speaking, owns the number and is registered as an owner on the Ofcom Number Management system. This is a key milestone for all involved in the comms industry. Get this right and our industry and the end user will benefit. Get it wrong and the industry could find end users moving away to other communications methods more and more." ■



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Happy people drive success



Virtual1 celebrate their Best Company success

Being 'happily employed' is the new objective for people in work and there's no doubt that an intelligently built culture is key to an organisation's long term success.

Naturally, every organisation has its own culture and there is no definitive answer to which culture should be developed and deployed. That said, a culture that is open and dynamic can foster a positive rapport with employees and could do wonders in attracting new talent.

According to Kate Brunning, Head of People and Culture at Virtual1, placing a priority on culture and measuring engagement needs to be a religious effort if you are to sustain an award-winning environment in the fast paced, progressive comms industry.

"We dropped appraisals around two years ago and embarked on a new, innovative tool that measures both engagement and performance on a regular monthly basis. The data we get from this is what drives our success. Not only can we measure how we are performing as a business, we have seen a direct correlation between performance and engagement. We spend a lot of time and energy on feedback from our people. After all, our success is underpinned by them so empowering them even further is mission critical."

Virtual1 has also nurtured a flat structure which Brunning believes has contributed to the true family feel created at the London based business.

"Our culture is diverse, friendly, innovative, inclusive and fun. Hierarchy exists but we place an enormous amount of trust in our people to do good work. Micro management won't get you anywhere here. Put simply, we are too fast paced for that environment.

"It has been said that a workplace culture can make or break businesses, and a strong one is said to nurture happy employees, putting an organisation on the path to success.

"If you are keen to be a best company to work for, then you need to accept as many man hours as needed to go into developing your people agenda as your products," concluded Brunning.



ADAM CATHCART
9 GROUP

HOW HAVE YOU MODERNISED YOUR WORKPLACE?

Providing access to technology is important but educating teams has been the key to user adoption. Staff are now communicating far more efficiently internally and with our partners too.

HOW HAVE YOU IMPROVED WORKFORCE INTERACTION?

Conversations are much more productive and real time collaboration on documents saves time and allows decisions to be made on the spot. All of this has allowed us to work more effectively and be even more responsive and proactive with our partners.

HOW DO YOU KEEP STAFF FEELING VALUED AND RESPECTED?

Simple things like being open and transparent go a long way. I meet with every member of staff each quarter and have a one-to-one with every new employee within their first week. This creates opportunities to hear ideas and share feedback.

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR BUSINESS CULTURE?

Inclusive. We have over 220 people in our team, but we've maintained a close-knit environment through things like providing free lunch every day and offering flexibility which has helped us to retain staff.



KATE WOOD
CHESS ICT

HOW HAVE YOU MODERNISED YOUR WORKPLACE?

We built 'Engage', a modern employee engagement tool, blending culture and technology through sentiment and analytics to support multi-site businesses, flexible working, homeworkers and people. It means everyone can communicate effectively.

HOW HAVE YOU IMPROVED WORKFORCE INTERACTION?

Communication had to change, growing from one office to six offices. Engage ensures everyone has monthly one-to-ones, which improved relationships at all levels. Added to this, the adoption of Microsoft Teams allows simple cross site collaboration.

HOW DO YOU KEEP STAFF FEELING VALUED AND RESPECTED?

Our 'Blueprint' details the attitudes and behaviours we expect of everyone. 'Engage' utilises AI and through sentiment scoring tells us how people really feel. Then our leaders, cultural ambassadors and parent champions step in to ensure they feel valued and cared for, while maximising their potential.

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR BUSINESS CULTURE?

Technology was driving culture, now culture drives technology. We recruit good people and through technology we help them become great, and help our customers do the same. In summary our culture is Passionate, and Proud to be Passionate.



JASON ROSS
CIRRUS

HOW HAVE YOU MODERNISED YOUR WORKPLACE?

Our smart new offices in Epsom provide a showcase for our technology including a recording studio and skype rooms. We also have a social space for hosting customer and staff events like the Rugby World Cup.

HOW HAVE YOU IMPROVED WORKFORCE INTERACTION?

Our own cloud-based technology ensures that homeworkers and mobile staff can easily contribute to company discussions and debates. Staff enjoy our social action days which foster employee motivation, engagement and well-being as well as supporting local good causes.

HOW DO YOU KEEP STAFF FEELING VALUED AND RESPECTED?

We cultivate an environment that values sound judgement and good communication, the courage to take risks and inspiring ideas and actions. Staff are actively encouraged to speak up and contribute and are given the freedom to delight the customer.

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR BUSINESS CULTURE?

We seek excellence. We celebrate innovation and creative thinking and, above all, going the extra mile for the customer and for our colleagues. We liken ourselves to a professional sports team where teamwork is the key to winning.



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s in the fast-paced channel



ROBERT BAYNES
ENTERNET

HOW HAVE YOU MODERNISED YOUR WORKPLACE?

Our dress code policy at our new Telford office is now one word: 'appropriate'. We've introduced a quiet room and communal areas allowing staff to take part in 'big build' Lego challenges or wellness sessions.

HOW HAVE YOU IMPROVED WORKFORCE INTERACTION?

We encourage interaction via our approachable management, flat structure, open plan office and communication tools to link up our nationwide employees. This year we held International Womens' Day and Family Fun Day events for all staff to participate in.

HOW DO YOU KEEP STAFF FEELING VALUED AND RESPECTED?

Our people are key to our success and we hold regular mindfulness sessions and provide a subsidised healthcare scheme to ensure their wellbeing. We have a dedicated CSR committee and an internal scheme to allow anybody to acknowledge a colleague's special contribution.

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR BUSINESS CULTURE?

We're a growing and dynamic business with a talented and knowledgeable team of employees. That's why we encourage open and honest communication to ignite vibrant ideas and creativity and lead the way in delivering full fibre.



VINCENT DISNEUR
UNION STREET

HOW HAVE YOU MODERNISED YOUR WORKPLACE?

Ergonomics is key. Comfy and supportive seating, state-of-the-art equipment, a relaxing breakout area and stylish décor have made the office environment a comfy, inviting and efficient place to be.

HOW HAVE YOU IMPROVED WORKFORCE INTERACTION?

In 2016 we initiated our 'Streets Ahead' programme. Made up of volunteers, the Streets Ahead committee organise regular trips, activities and social events for our team. We also host an annual party for our 90 staff and partners.

HOW DO YOU KEEP STAFF FEELING VALUED AND RESPECTED?

Our Streets Ahead programme incorporates recognition awards where staff can nominate peers to receive monetary rewards, gifts and experiences at a monthly prize giving. We encourage staff to have their say, promote a healthy work/life balance and offer continuous access to training.

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR BUSINESS CULTURE?

Union Street is a relaxed and friendly place to work with a casual dress code and numerous staff benefits. That said, our work is fast paced and challenging. We promote an engaging and collaborative approach and encourage staff to innovate and take initiative.



PAM BLANCHARD
ICA

HOW HAVE YOU MODERNISED YOUR WORKPLACE?

Modernisation has come from our 'Smart Office' approach. We've moved away from standard on-site hardware-based infrastructure to delivering services and applications to our staff through cloud platforms, which has helped create a flexible remote worker strategy.

HOW HAVE YOU IMPROVED WORKFORCE INTERACTION?

We have introduced a number of additional inter-operable mobile/desk-based applications and the use of shared working spaces which has helped foster a more dynamic and collaborative approach for sharing information and ideas within ICA.

HOW DO YOU KEEP STAFF FEELING VALUED AND RESPECTED?

Common respect is a key value at ICA. We use 'Office Vibe' to give the team the opportunity to share regular and honest feedback to the director. The team have stated that they 'love' working for ICA and 'love' our customers.

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR BUSINESS CULTURE?

ICA has been established for over 23 years and we enjoy solving problems. The business has a number of goals and objectives centred around the customer experience. We understand that this in turn helps our customer's run their businesses better.



KATE BRUNNING
VIRTUAL1

HOW HAVE YOU MODERNISED YOUR WORKPLACE?

We track our engagement religiously. We dropped appraisals two years ago and embarked on a new, innovative tool that measures both engagement and performance on a regular monthly basis. The data we get from this drives our success.

HOW HAVE YOU IMPROVED WORKFORCE INTERACTION?

Aside from the obvious human interaction and regular team nights out, we implemented Workplace last year in an effort to share and collaborate information. Essentially, it's a comms tool owned by our people, for our people.

HOW DO YOU KEEP STAFF FEELING VALUED AND RESPECTED?

We listen and we act. It's that simple. No matter what role you are in, you are treated equally. We spend a lot of time and energy on the people agenda, and this is what has led to much of the company's success.

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR BUSINESS CULTURE?

Friendly, innovative, diverse, inclusive and fun! Our flat structure creates a true 'family' feel. We place a lot of trust in our people to do good work ... micro-management won't get you anywhere here!



ELLIE ALLSEYBROOK
INFORM BILLING

HOW HAVE YOU MODERNISED YOUR WORKPLACE?

Our office has open-plan and more private workspaces, comfortable collaboration areas and all equipment is high-spec. We benefit from a semi-rural location - there has been much research into the wellness benefits from work environments with views of nature.

HOW HAVE YOU IMPROVED WORKFORCE INTERACTION?

We have invested in some key systems to ensure colleagues can communicate and collaborate easily, wherever their location. Half our company are developers and half are customer facing, so understanding each other's challenges is key to bridging the divide.

HOW DO YOU KEEP STAFF FEELING VALUED AND RESPECTED?

Communication and involvement are vital. We prioritise one-to-one and team meetings and share business successes with everyone. We host regular company events and provide nice benefits, but most important is knowing how to support individuals achieve their work/ life balance.

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR BUSINESS CULTURE?

Everyone has a significant impact on Inform Billing's success. Colleagues take great care in their work because they don't want to let one another down and therefore there is a lot of trust.



SUE ELLIOT
WINDSOR TELECOM

HOW HAVE YOU MODERNISED YOUR WORKPLACE?

When we moved to bigger offices, the right environment was key. It's light and bright and a place where the team can be proud to say they work. A fabulous breakout area was as important as the working environment and the tech to allow people to do their job.

HOW HAVE YOU IMPROVED WORKFORCE INTERACTION?

We use tech for what tech is good at, but there is no substitute for inter-departmental collaboration and social time, with a clear and shared mission, purpose and values.

HOW DO YOU KEEP STAFF FEELING VALUED AND RESPECTED?

Training, recognition and collaboration. The team have a fantastic input into shaping the future of the company. We work together to drive results.

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR BUSINESS CULTURE?

We work hard but have a lot of fun in the way. If I hear plenty of laughter in the workplace, I know we are doing good work.

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How Sky created a divers

Lip service and mere cultural mood music will do nothing to advance the spread of greater diversity and inclusion (D&I) in the channel. What we need are real world examples of inspirational D&I champions that carry substance, drive change and stand by the indicators of their performance. Enter Sky Business...

The truth is that the comms sector is, by fate, rooted in male dominated soil, and unless channel organisations cohere behind a more diverse and inclusive alternative to its general heritage it's hard to see how the industry, synonymous with technology leadership, can be considered remotely modern. Industry research and discussion alone will not solve the channel's D&I deficit. It needs a cultural stimulus. So this month Comms Dealer kicks off a regular feature showing how D&I progressors are actually developing and driving diversity within their organisations.

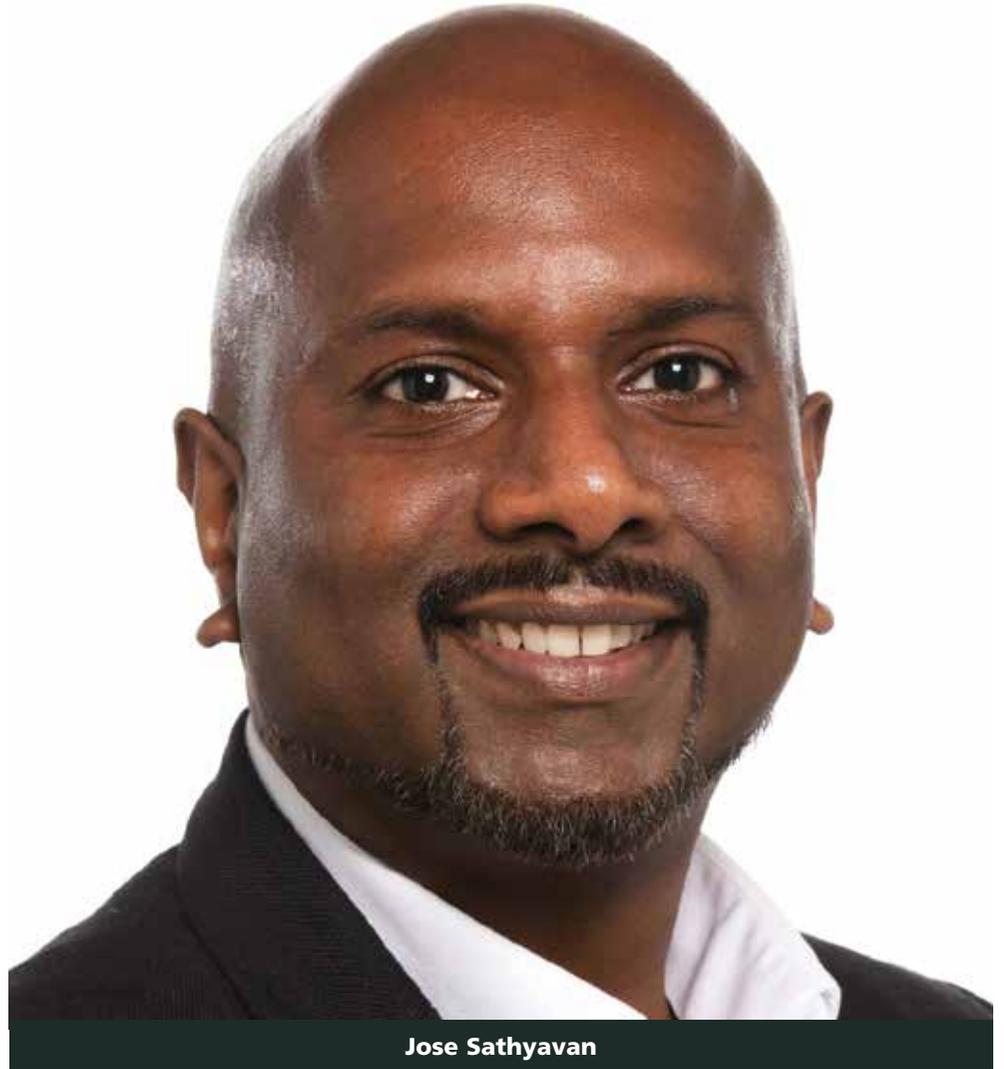
Pledges to prioritise D&I cannot be fulfilled unless there is a means of bringing about the full promise. As such, Sky Business's commitment to D&I contains many facets, initiatives and reforms, all designed to change its constitution for the better, leading to a real opening up of diversity and inclusion. "The Sky Business leadership team has D&I at the top of its agenda," stated Jose Sathyavan,

Head of Provisioning for Sky Ethernet, and an active agent in the company's D&I development campaign.

"They understand that to build a better tomorrow we must have gender diversity throughout the business. Our efforts are also focused on creating a positive work environment where staff feel valued, safe and comfortable enough to be themselves. Having a diverse workforce allows us to be more productive, innovative and look at things from a range of different perspectives."

To maximise the positive impacts of its D&I culture Sky Business sets objectives that are always all about making a real difference to employees. "When building a diversity and inclusion culture it is important to keep the dialogue open with employees and supporting them in the right way," added Sathyavan. "We have key objectives that we hold ourselves accountable for and review the outcomes."

Of course, all such initiatives are meaningless with no



Jose Sathyavan

There could now be an emerging fault-line in the channel, a division between businesses that live, breathe and promote the value of greater diversity and inclusion in their organisations – and those that don't

indication of their success or failure, but Sky's plan for spreading the influence of diversity is meaningful for many reasons, all measured and benchmarked. "We quantify the positive impact of our D&I culture through people surveys," explained Sathyavan. "We survey employees twice a year and compare the scores between various demographic groups to explore indicators that show how staff are feeling about their involvement, and whether they feel

valued and heard. We break these demographics into segments – men and women, BAME (black, Asian and minority ethnic), LGBT+ and disability categories. This research enables us to evolve the culture whenever we identify any imbalance in the experiences of our staff.

Accountability

"We hold ourselves accountable for how we are doing and where we are lacking. This approach means that our inclusion

objectives form part of everyday working life. A recent example includes the recruitment of the Sky Business Communications leadership team which has a 50/50 gender diversity split. This is great to see in what is usually a male dominated industry. The channel is a fast-paced growing sector and we need to be encouraging the right talent to help this industry thrive. By having a balanced workforce you are automatically broadening the skills and



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se and inclusive business

knowledge available to you, creating more innovation and giving your business a competitive edge."

There are no obstacles to the development of a diverse and inclusive culture other than intransigence. And each of Sky's initiatives demonstrate the ability of all organisations, large and small, to make simple and effective first steps. Indeed, much of Sky's current thinking is unequivocally motivated by the desire to further develop and maintain a diverse and inclusive workplace environment based on networks.

Inclusion networks

"We have a number of inclusion networks which are supported and sponsored by members of our management team," stated Sathyavan. "They are driven by employees, for employees, and include Women@Sky, LGBT+@Sky, Multiculture@Sky, Parents@Sky, ArmedForces@Sky and Body&Mind@Sky. Each network has a leader who holds monthly or quarterly community building sessions during which staff also learn new skills, discuss issues and voice their opinions."

Sky's D&I strategy and culture shows that any such endeavour requires full commitment across the organisation. All businesses have a vested interest in formalising D&I, and every scheme, initiative or programme should carry the same key messages. One uncompromising tenet is equal opportunities for males and females. "It is important that recruitment practices are fair and consistent," pointed out Sathyavan. "We have levelled the playing

field by ensuring, where possible, shortlists for all roles are 50 per cent male and 50 per cent female. All job applications are gender coded, meaning that the job description appeals to males and females. We are also committing to gender-equal interview panels, bringing a fair and balanced approach to how we recruit new talent."

In 2017 Sky launched its Women in Technology Scholarship, a scheme that encourages women to pursue a career in technology. The first year was so successful that Sky has increased the number of scholars for 2018/19. "It doesn't stop there," noted Sathyavan. "We have created a mentor programme for aspiring Sky Business leaders, matching employees with mentors to help them learn new skills and different ways of working. All Sky Business employees get access to

workshops to discuss their development plans and are given guidance on setting goals and how to achieve them. We ensure teams take time out of their busy work diaries to do this. It promotes inclusion and improves motivation."

Unconscious bias

All business leaders must see that the path to any conceivable diversity plan will require a clear strategy to eradicate the negative influence of unconscious bias. "This is a big issue and seeps into a number of key decisions including recruitment," stated Sathyavan. "So we are not just raising awareness but also encouraging changes in behaviour. We promote unconscious bias training to all of our teams internally. Most people that undertake the training are made aware of some of their blind spots and recognise that they need to make a change."

As part of keeping diversity and inclusion alive and relevant Sky runs a number of workshops that also function as springboards for further cultural development and growth. "Having active programmes is the first step, but to ensure the culture really changes you need to evolve your initiatives," added Sathyavan. "For example, in response to employee feedback we introduced the Sky Business Women into Leadership cohort; and to promote our Better with Balance ethos each member invited a male colleague to the workshop which now has a 50/50 gender split. This is one example of how we are constantly evolving our programmes."

There could now be an emerging fault-line in the channel, a division between businesses that live, breathe and promote the value of greater diversity and inclusion in their organisations – and

those that don't. "There are a lot of benefits to setting up a diversity and inclusion programme," reaffirmed Sathyavan. "This should come from the top-down to set the right tone and culture in the office. It may be hard to implement from scratch, but companies have transformed their cultures in 12 months when the leadership team has set the right objectives that everyone sticks to."

Sky's structural approach to embedding D&I into its culture and operations has blossomed, so much so that D&I is now embedded in its DNA. "It's important to weave your diversity and inclusion objectives into everything from internal communication to partner conferences," added Sathyavan. "The key is to always be engaging, share stories, build closer teams internally and never stop raising awareness." ■

What diversity and inclusion means to me...

Rohita Kopf, Marketing Manager, Sky Business

Diversity and inclusion at work has always been important to me. I believe that some organisations may not truly understand the underlying importance of inclusion and tend to put their revenue or business objectives ahead of the needs of their employees. They don't always consider or understand the business benefits of a diverse workforce.

In Sky's case, personal growth and development is always on the agenda, and I quickly got involved in the Women into Leadership programme.



Rohita Kopf

This was a great opportunity for me to support my career development, network with directors and create a growth mindset. I have a mentor

who holds a position I aspire to occupy. She openly talks about her journey and the challenges she overcame to progress her career.

The Women into Leadership network includes a mixture of male, female, BAME and LGBT speakers, so it's truly diverse. I can be myself and put new ideas forward which will be listened to and actioned. It's great to be part of a business communications team that already has a 50/50 split in gender diversity at leadership level. The opinions of employees are often sought and feedback is asked for in quarterly people surveys. We openly discuss outcomes from the survey as a team, and how we can improve the work environment for everyone. ■

Switch up your planning

Whether your glass is half empty or half full on the 2025 PSTN switch off, all channel partners need a plan according to Terry O'Brien and his team at Digital Wholesale Solutions.

Although it's still six years away, Openreach's deactivation of the ISDN network is already creating challenges and opportunities for resellers. For telephony specialists there are threats to existing revenues yet, perhaps for the first time in years, the change represents a significant opportunity as customers consider their future options. DWS CEO O'Brien is bullish, believing the switch off presents an unprecedented growth opportunity. "By embracing the change, upskilling and working to take customers on a journey to IP, partners can use this industry change to their advantage, future proofing their businesses while providing real value add for their customers," he said.

"People need to talk, and this is as true as ever in the digital era. The technology transition to cloud and IP, and the arrival of the digital dragons – Microsoft, Google etc – into telecoms, blurs the boundaries of the traditional telco and IT markets, offering customers better, faster and cheaper ways to communicate and collaborate. This gives the channel a brilliant opportunity to engage in an exciting, much broader and more strategic conversation with customers, not just about their connectivity

and telephony, but about how they run their entire businesses in the future."

O'Brien urges resellers to rethink their propositions, as simply replacing analogue lines and older style PBXs with SIP and hosted telephony won't enable growth or create differentiation. "The channel needs to evolve and develop its value propositions, starting from the solid platform of their telecoms expertise and their trusted advisor status with their customers, while being bold and upskilling in new technology in order to grab the growth opportunity," commented O'Brien.

DWS has been at the forefront of PSTN and ISDN withdrawal planning throughout the past two years, being one of only 29 respondents to the UK-wide industry consultation back in 2018, tackling tricky topics like porting, directly with Openreach and the Federation of Communication Services (FCS).

But it isn't all gloom and doom, according to Claire Makin, Voice Product Manager at DWS. "If you know your replacement products, not just for voice but also connectivity, then the 2025 date will not be a problem," she said. "That's why we're giving



Terry O'Brien

The channel needs to evolve and develop its value propositions, starting from the solid platform of their telecoms expertise and their trusted advisor status with customers

our partners access to information and products to get a head start in the race to the 2025 finish line."

With over 400 partners registering for DWS's recent webinar series, The PSTN Withdrawal and the Digital Opportunity, it's clear that partners are keen to take advantage of the advice and support on offer. "The 2025 withdrawal is a challenge and many of our partners have responded with some important points, from porting difficulties, national infrastructure concerns and questions regarding how this will be communicated

to their customers," added Makin. "All these questions shape the feedback we give to Openreach."

Knowledge is key

Head of Connectivity, James Montague, says his team will be keeping partners geared up and ready for the big switch off. "Knowledge is key to success," he commented. "Openreach has raised awareness of the switch off, but I don't think many have foreseen the impact on broadband which is currently supported on the voice line. So we are providing monthly webinars to keep partners up to date

with the latest news on the switch off, and extending our resources to partners."

DWS is also extending its expertise on replacement products into 5G mobile-based solutions. "5G is gathering momentum and will play a significant part in the fixed line migration with Fixed Wireless Access (FWA) products becoming more commonplace," stated Alex Mawson, DWS Product Director. "The DWS team have built the portfolio and skills to help partners grab hold of this opportunity and capitalise on the switch off." ■

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Cramond prepares for bi

The merger of RTF Networks with investor company Focus Group brings far more scope to raise the level of support and ambition for their ramped up partner strategy, according to Head of Channel Joline Cramond.

In a leap of faith ten years ago Cramond and her business partner Caroline Herbert jumped at an investment opportunity and, backed by the founders of Focus Group, bucked the economic trend to establish RTF Networks during the recession. "We had nothing to lose and everything to gain," stated Cramond. "We worked a channel model bringing on primarily PBX resellers, placing their line and data orders through us. We also had specialist inbound service knowledge so utilised this set of expertise to offer marketing and number tracking services to the automotive market which proved successful. Our core product portfolio at this time was BT Wholesale, broadband and inbound services."

Prior to the merger RTF Networks registered £3.9 million turnover, billing 1,500 customers with 70 per cent of the business derived from the channel. Specialist verticals include automotive, dentistry and the SME environment. "We merged both RTF Networks and another Kent based acquisition into larger prestigious offices in Kings Hill Business estate under the Focus brand," explained Cramond. "We have always worked to similar processes and used the same billing platform as Focus Group. The transition is about moving the business forward under the new brand and expanding



Joline Cramond

The transition is about moving the business forward under the new brand and expanding our opportunity operationally and strategically

our opportunity operationally and strategically."

On merging RTF into Focus Group Cramond took on the role of Head of Channel. Her current priorities are to reform the channel programme, build a partner portal and work

with the Operations Director Chris Wild to develop a strategy that supports the channel programme. "A full launch is planned for early 2020," stated Cramond. "We have over 200 channel partners across group who all interact with the business in a different

way, so my immediate challenge is realigning them to the channel model."

Fresh approaches

The product and service proposition is also being re-engineered to give partners easy access to business growth tools. The

key components are finance options, support mechanisms, self-service environments and marketing tools. "Training plans will also form part of our strategy to ensure partners can on-board new product sets without major disruptions to their core business," noted Cramond. "Historically, elements of the product sets have been difficult to access for some of our partners, so we have simplified our proposition to give access to all voice offerings, network services, IT, Cisco, mobile and energy."

More broadly, Focus Group will structure its sales and operational approach to reflect primary market segments – the small business market of 1-10 employees, SMBs of 10-250 seats and mid-market and enterprise organisations of 250-plus employees. "With each market space having a specific product portfolio, marketing strategy and operational function, our main focus will be ensuring that customers are able to communicate with us easily through a streamlined engagement approach that includes a self-serve model," added Cramond.

In paving the way ahead Cramond's prior work experience will be a key factor in the development of systems and strategy. As a child she aspired to follow in her father's footsteps to become a fabrication engineer and take over his



g channel push

business. But a stint working for a software development company in her early 20s sparked an interest in systems architecture. The attraction was then fuelled by her work on a fault management system for a national utility company. Cramond's next career step involved working as an independent before joining a small Kent-based voice reseller with a remit to manage the inbound side of the business.

"After several months of hassling the carriers and getting to grips with call plans and the differences between the many different types of inbound numbers,

The key to success is to be agile and agnostic, not tied to one partner

I realised the potential to grow the organisation with bespoke call plans/flows with reoccurring revenues," she stated. "I continued to grow this area of the business for several years until it was hit by the acquisition train which prompted me to re-evaluate my options."

Prior to leaving the business Cramond was exposed to a large deployment of hosted voice for DHL. "I was absorbed in this project for over a year," she explained. "It wasn't a glamorous role and meant getting down to basics with hard hats, steel toe caps, hi-viz workwear and many days sat in a freezing comms room. However, this was one of the biggest learning

curves of my career, one that served me well in my next venture with RTF Networks."

The first notable step-up for the fledgling RTF business was moving out of a log cabin on Cramond's father's farm in Kent to a business estate in Maidstone during year two. The subsequent addition of hosted voice unlocked a tenfold opportunity, enabling the company to engage with a variety of channel partners other than legacy PBX resellers. "We were also able to offer our partners the opportunity to include hosted alongside their preferred on-premise solutions," added Cramond.

Fast forward to today and Cramond is witnessing significant growth in demand for cloud, bandwidth and collaboration solutions, along with rising expectations from partners and end customers for applications to be quick to deploy, secure and reliable to run. "We are productising to track these trends," said Cramond.

"And building a growth plan that puts a strong emphasis on cloud, voice and IT products. This is where our growth is coming from. We have also seen more intelligent data products bringing significant growth, specifically SD WAN products.

"The key to success is to be agile and agnostic. There is no need for us to tie ourselves to one provider, we can choose the best-of-breed and pass this on to our customers and partners. This is the key USP of a great reseller – we can provide a consultative and efficient way to support the digital transformation of businesses in the UK."

Just a minute with Joline Cramond...

What talent do you wish you had? My brother is a pianist and I am always in awe when he plays. I wish I had listened more during my piano lessons when I was a child

Tell us something about yourself we don't know: I enjoy clay pigeon shooting

What do you fear the most? Failure

Best advice you have ever been given: Always be true to yourself

If you weren't in comms what would you be doing? If I had followed my original plan, potentially running a fabrication engineering company

The biggest risk you have taken? Agreeing to a large installation of Wi-Fi into the Middle East, with international support, language, cultural and timezone challenges

What could you not live without in your job? My calendar: If it's not in my diary it's not happening

Your biggest opportunity? The switch off of the traditional Openreach network, accompanied by more agile and cost-efficient data products

How do you relax when not working? Practicing for, or attending, the ladies shooting club competitions

Your main strength and what could you improve on? I am a natural problem solver and strive for perfection, but this always leads to tasks taking longer than necessary. I am working on letting go more

Top tip? Stay ahead of digital transformation. The industry landscape is changing rapidly



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Building a network and c

fit for Digital Britain

Comms Vision Platinum sponsor BT Wholesale has identified the core components of its long-term strategy and is building a pathway towards Digital Britain based on a mix of fixed and mobile innovations, reveals Managing Director Alex Tempest.

All-IP will be at the heart of our portfolio evolution, covering voice and data services alongside fixed and mobile convergence, so BT is evolving a comprehensive strategic plan to roll out both 5G and all-IP infrastructure. We aim to be the first to market with new IP access solutions that will form the foundation of the propositions we offer. This will see us continue the move from traditional products to specific customer solutions that enable the convergence of services supported by a range of managed and professional service capabilities. Our approach will be to put our customers at the centre of our strategy.

Single Order Generic Ethernet Access (SOGEA) and Fibre to the Premise (FTTP) are critical to the future of Digital Britain and BT Wholesale is at the vanguard of developing these products with an aggressive role out plan. It is clear for all to see that insatiable demand for bandwidth across the UK will continue, so it's crucial for us to support this demand, both to support our partners and the business solutions they are delivering, and by continuing to invest in the network of the future underpinned by the roll out of technologies such as 5G. The current priority is to enable our wholesale partners to proactively transform their customer's network ahead of the Public Switched Telephone Network (PSTN) closure and prepare them for an all-IP converged world.

As the workforce in general becomes more distributed, customers are needing high speed networks so they can access cloud-based applications. This has led to an insatiable demand for high speed data in all locations, enabling our partners and their customers to run dynamic and bandwidth hungry applications wherever they may be so they're not chained to a desk. Furthermore, through the development of fibre and 5G, the use of IoT and M2M communication will grow exponentially, providing our partners with even more data to drive new insights

and efficiencies, as well as create new applications for their customers that weren't available previously.

On the road to Digital Britain BT Wholesale will be 100 per cent focused on the network, carrying critical data, underpinning business applications and infrastructure and offering our customers the opportunity to take advantage of converged networking. We also recognise that the adoption of future technologies requires cutting edge skills and capabilities that simplify the journey, reduce the cost of adoption and speed up the return on investment. This is why BT is continuing to invest not only in technology, but also in creating a service led organisation that can be leveraged by our customers, that underpins the design, delivery, integration and management of services.

Network performance

As new technologies evolve our range of skills across BT will continue to extend, including everything from the network and cloud to IoT, drones, small cells, 5G and beyond. The main drivers of technology and comms purchasing as fibre and 5G come to proliferate will be network performance. This will be the key benefit for our customers, so we need to ensure that we're continuing to lead the way in fibre and 5G technology.

Today, the economics of network build-outs are challenged, with a choice of multiple national networks. Owner operators should focus on investing in the digital experience of their customers, enabling them to transition to an all-IP world and consume services in a digital way. The successful resellers and MSPs will have a roadmap that supports a customer's migration as they move into a digital-first world, offering support not only for networks but for the application suite that supports their customers' businesses. Securing these applications and customer critical data will also need to be a priority focus area. ■

Platinum sponsor viewpoints continue on page 44

All-IP will be at the heart of our portfolio evolution, covering voice and data services alongside fixed and mobile convergence

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Owner operators should focus on investing in the digital experience of their customers, enabling them to transition to an all-IP world and consume services in a digital way

Strategising full fibre opportunities to Digital Britain

Platinum sponsor TalkTalk Business's assessment of project Digital Britain shows the depth of its commitment to rolling out full fibre as a disruptive challenger brand, according to Director of Partners Richard Thompson who revels in strategising the emerging high speed opportunities for channel partners.

Digital Britain relies on the future of full fibre, and it isn't just the channel that is waking up to this. Full fibre is gaining momentum in the mainstream news and press, as well as being firmly on the Prime Minister, Boris Johnson's, agenda. It's no surprise FTTP is evoking the interest of politicians. A study by Ofcom found that investment in faster broadband has significant benefits to the UK economy, increasing the UK's GDP by 0.47 per cent per annum on average. This may seem like an insignificant number but it equates to around £12 billion a year. You don't have to be an economist to understand the transformative impact of FTTP on homes and businesses and the huge opportunity this brings to the channel.

As a challenger brand, TalkTalk Business is looking forward to disrupting the market again in the same way we did years ago with Local Loop Unbundling (LLU). Earlier this year, TalkTalk's CEO Tristia Harrison addressed our partners at the Connectivity Matters Summit and explained that our FTTP strategy is a two-pronged approach, delivering Openreach FTTP and working with FibreNation and other altnets to offer true scale in a simple, ubiquitous way. Over the last year we have invested millions in our Fibre for Everyone Programme with the help of our dedicated team which has grown to over 130 full-time employees. This is one of the biggest projects we have ever seen, and investment in the programme is only second to the investment into our network, highlighting just how serious we are about FTTP. The entire business is dedicating huge amounts of time, energy and investment into making it a success. Over the next few months we will be working with several of our partners, focusing

on building the capability that meets their needs so we can jointly create the products of the future together.

In 2018 TalkTalk transformed York into the UK's first Ultra Fibre Optic city. The full fibre network rollout spans more than 33,000 homes and businesses and is on target to reach up to 55,000 across York by 2020. We learnt a huge amount from building this full fibre network and we're committed to sharing our insights with partners to help them succeed. FTTP proved transformational for the speed-hungry residents and businesses of York, with a CSAT of 87 per cent and a very low churn rate and cost to serve. We learnt valuable lessons about the engineering and build of the network, as well as how to effectively market and sell FTTP utilising hyperlocal marketing across all stages of the customer journey.

Collaborations that matter

In addition to working on our own offering we're at the heart of infrastructure and regulatory changes. We're working with the Government and Ofcom on behalf of our partners to push full fibre to as many places as quickly as possible and ensure that our partners have a voice. We want to encourage a vibrant and competitive market for the channel, which as we've seen with LLU thrives when there is competition from multiple access providers instead of a monopoly environment. We welcome the Government's ambitions for a full fibre rollout and as a customer champion we will do everything we can to get our partners connected as soon as possible. All of this can only be done if the whole nation embraces FTTP, with multiple providers building in many areas at the same time encouraging more competition.

You don't have to be an economist to understand the impact of FTTP on homes and businesses and the huge opportunity this brings to the channel

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Opportunities on the road



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A smooth customer experience is essential for the success of FTTP. There will be a patchwork quilt of coverage offered by multiple providers without standardisation, and each provider will have their own set of technical standards, operational models, pricing, product variants, SLAs and customer journeys. It will be extremely complex and challenging for the channel to navigate this new world. But our aim is to work with a variety of access providers, making it as simple as possible for our partners to consume through our user friendly portals and APIs. They'll be able to deliver a cost-effective and reliable product to their customers with one SLA.

Competitive advantages

Providers that utilise big data will also gain a competitive advantage in the FTTP arena. As part of our offering we can help partners truly understand their customer base using analytics and big data to highlight which of their customers would benefit from FTTP, reducing churn and improving the customer experience. Plus, as we learn which areas are due to get FTTP next, we'll share this information and work with our partners to develop an effective go-to-market strategy. This information helps

them to build targeted campaigns to sell the right products to the right customers at the optimum time.

FTTP will close the digital divide which has left millions of businesses and homes behind and bring them up to speed with the rest of the world. Higher bandwidth, faster speeds and an improved customer experience all equate to a reduced customer churn and a lower cost to serve. Once a customer is on FTTP, they are unlikely to move and there is a clear and easy bandwidth upgrade path. Therefore, access providers who move first will reap the rewards and we've already begun to see the first offerings emerge. Our partners will benefit from our experience as we help them lead a successful FTTP proposition in the B2B market.

I urge every business to think about FTTP now. We will work shoulder-to-shoulder with our partners to build and shape a business grade FTTP product based on their needs. Digital Britain is full of opportunity for the channel and I personally believe it's one of the most exciting times to work in this industry. The channel community thrives on competition and therefore more competition from multiple providers should create more opportunity for everyone. ■

Digital Britain is full of opportunity for the channel and it's one of the most exciting times to work in this industry

Delivering on the deal

When seeking to exit or secure investment there are whirlpools and jagged rocks on all sides. Here, Knight Corporate Finance Director Paul Billingham steers you through the pitfalls.

Ask anyone who has been through an exit or investment process with their business, or undertaken M&A, and they will tell you that there are many potential pitfalls to consider and overcome. From the outset it is important to always remember that there are three key stages to any process – planning, the transaction itself and post-completion. No stage is less important than the other. If one stage fails the whole process fails. When we meet with potential clients we always highlight how vital the planning stage is. Whichever type of transaction you undertake, it is crucial that you are fully prepared. You will need to know your 'end game' and ensure that the business is ready for what is likely to be a very intensive process.

If you do not plan and the business is not ready, the process is unlikely to get started, or will unravel at the transaction stage once due diligence starts. We have seen businesses rush into a process assuming that they are transaction ready, but once due diligence starts and they cannot answer questions or have the right information available, the

process slows down and creates a lack of confidence from the other side. Fail to prepare, prepare to fail!

Once a process moves to the actual transaction stage, momentum is key, and key to momentum is ensuring that all parties on the transaction (buyer/investor, seller, management, lawyers, advisers) are all focused. You also need to ensure that the transaction does not distract from running the business day-to-day. A common mistake is that the founder or management get too involved in the process and take their eye off the ball. Nothing reduces the chances of a successful transaction more than a business under performing. Given a process can last anything between six and 12 months, it is vital that the organisation continues to perform in line with what has been set out in any Information Memorandum provided.

The transaction stage is always challenging. It can also be tiring and at times frustrating. It is easy for founders to get emotional and even irrational at times, so keeping calm and poised is important. We have known of deals fail at the transaction stage purely because it has



Paul Billingham

The transaction stage is always challenging. It can also be tiring and at times frustrating

all been too much for a business owner and they simply decide to call it a day. When we work with clients we see a key part of our role as taking this pressure away. It is no coincidence that more deals fail when corporate finance advisers are not involved. Lawyers are an important part of the process but they don't tend to get involved in the emotional aspects of a transaction.

Post-completion matters

Finally, the phase that is often ignored until the last minute is the post-completion stage. Knowing what each party wants post-completion is important, and with trade sales in particular, the success of a transaction will depend on delivering

an agreed post-completion plan. We have seen buyers undertake transactions at low valuations, thinking they have a great deal, only to see the value erode post-completion because of either a lack of planning or lack of foresight about the potential pitfalls that 'value' deals often bring.

Many trade deals involve earn-outs and understanding the rules of engagement post-deal are vital in ensuring that there is no fall out between parties and success is maximised. Earn-outs can work very well, but the ones that do are those that have a clear set of aligned interests between all parties. If a founder wants to leave immediately but have consideration

dependent on delivering an earn-out, can they be confident that it will be maximised in their absence?

Knight Corporate Finance always recommends using advisers on any transaction. Why? Because the most successful buyers in the market have specialist M&A teams, and investors undertake transactions day-in-day out – so we are always amazed by anyone considering a transaction without professional advice. It is true that an advised transaction results in higher fees, but hands on guidance greatly increases the chance of success. A good adviser will overcome all of the potential pitfalls outlined in this article. ■

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Chen doubles up



Elsa Chen

ENTANET CEO Elsa Chen is to double up as CityFibre's Group Chief Customer Officer, a newly created position. "The scale of opportunity that CityFibre has created in the UK market is one that we haven't seen in this industry for a long time," said Chen. "By applying a customer lens from infrastructure delivery to product innovation we can deliver insight-led solutions and services to our partners."

"We have already begun to align our sales operations, account management, marketing, product management and service operations teams that support our partners

across all the markets we serve. This is not only about streamlining how we work with partners, but also ensuring a unified customer experience."

CityFibre CEO Greg Mesch added: "As we continue to deliver our Gigabit City investment programme, bringing full fibre access to over 20 per cent of the UK market by 2025, this new role will bring a clear executive focus on every aspect of customer value creation and drive customer-focused investment across our operations."

Also on the move...

FULL fibre wholesaler FibreNation has bolstered its leadership team with the appointment of Darren Woods as Chief



Darren Woods and Belinda Fearnley

Financial Officer. His previous experience includes heading up change programmes such as mergers and acquisitions, business-wide IT implementations, supply chain restructuring and the outsourcing of transactional services across a range of sectors including construction, manufacturing and professional services. FibreNation also hired Belinda Fearnley as Head of HR. She brings experience from a range of sectors including banking and financial services, utilities and retail. CEO Neil McArthur said: "Darren and Belinda will help to facilitate the next stage of our growth as we aim to reach our goal of bringing FTTP to three million homes and businesses across the UK in the next ten years."

SERVICE provider Fidelity Group has appointed Niki Foote as Marketing Manager. Foote, who hails from Zimbabwe, is a BCom graduate from Oxford Brookes University where she majored in marketing and business management. She has 19 years career experience in marketing working on many international brands, and ran her own agency in her native country for 10 years before emigrating to the UK in March. "I had to leave due to the economic situation in Zimbabwe," said Foote. "Having been through so many challenges in my life I very much identify with the objectives of the Fidelity Group to connect, grow and excel."



Kate Brunning

KATE Brunning's promotion to the Director of People role at Virtual1 is recognition of her achievements working as Head of People and further signposts the network operator's commitment to staff progression, well being, culture and diversity, says CEO Tom O'Hagan.

"Kate's contribution to the organisation has been highly significant," he said. "She was instrumental in Virtual1 receiving three star accreditation in The Sunday Times – Best Companies to Work For ranking. Kate's work has also been recognised by other Best Company to Work For awards. Our people are our greatest asset and I am keen that their interests are represented at the highest level within Virtual1."



Niki Foote

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