

# COMMS VISION CONVENTION 2023

THE NETWORK SUMMIT FOR ICT CHANNEL LEADERS

## CONFERENCE REPORT



## Creating a competitive edge in times of change

This year's gold standard Comms Vision conference took a multi-faceted research-led approach to unearthing why many organisations may only be scratching the surface of their competitive potential, providing critical insights into what is required to forge a long-term edge over rivals based on four key categories – Leadership, Culture, Technology and Markets, and Industry Collaboration – all of which contribute towards building an ultra-competitive business as well as a force for good.

Are the right issues shaping your decision making?	28-29
Why it's time to think more deeply about culture	30-32
Research reveals urgent need for a partner enablement reality check	33-35
Collaboration enters unprecedented acceleration phase	36-37
Comms Vision 2023 in pictures	38



# Are the right issues shaping

To help chart a strategic course forward, Comms Vision 2023's opening insight session – based on Comms Dealer research – delved into the many business dynamics impacting leaders in the ICT sector today, and clarified why striking the right balance between the interconnected priorities identified by the study is key to achieving sustained growth.

**A**nalysis of the research data identified strategic mismatches that bring into focus whether the right issues are shaping decision making. And Rob Hamlin, Chief Strategy Officer, CityFibre, believes that it's time to resolutely double down on today's changing leadership priorities. "A key reason for change is that people within organisations and customers are evolving generationally in terms of their make up," he commented. "By 2030, 70 per cent of the workforce will be millennial or Gen Z. For them, diversity, purpose and the environment are front of mind. This is an opportunity to take businesses to the next stage, make better decisions, present our organisations in a different way and make our employees and customers feel part of that journey."

Comms Dealer's research also put a bright spotlight on why leadership strategies may need to evolve with a particular focus on ESG and D&I. "Management styles need to change," commented Kathryn Platt, Head of Indirect, Vodafone Business. "I'm on the Vodafone ELT team but it took me ten years to get there. That

was less about Vodafone as a business and more about how I evolved my own career. The problem is a lack of confidence among females about taking on those bigger roles. It's up to us as a community to inspire and make sure companies are embracing their talent and capability. From a D&I perspective, constant conversation is the best way to make it happen. It's easy to lose trust if you're not having the right conversations."

### Key interventions

The panel discussion also put a spotlight on the key interventions that leaders can make to put their organisation on a stronger footing. "There is absolutely more that we need to do," commented John Chester, Director of Wholesale, Fixed, Virgin Media O2 Business. "Around 50 per cent of our executive team is female and they are role models for the wider business, encouraging the next generation of leaders. We also have communities of support across many areas, five pillars that people can plug into. This creates a supportive environment in the workplace and gives people additional points of reference beyond traditional line management."

According to Lisa Hewitt, People Director, TalkTalk Wholesale Services, the starting point is to engage all stakeholders – colleagues, customers and investors – and to understand what matters most to them. "Then you can build and embed initiatives into strategy," she stated. "It's also key to invest in data that demonstrates how you're performing against KPIs and shows RoI. Organisations perhaps need to be better at implementing initiatives such as these. It's all about agility, and where you can capitalise on that is by empowering middle management. These people are leading the day-to-day operations while talking to suppliers and customers. Having them as your biggest champions is the best way to get things done. We tackle that through regular communication."

The imperative to change is unquestionable, but the practicalities are not easy, observed Daryl Pile, MD UK Indirect, Gamma. "Business leaders set the culture, they set everything," he said. "But that becomes a challenge when you get to three degrees of separation. A company with 30 to 40 people will live and breathe the culture and the values you set. You employ



**You need to ask how ESG, D&I and accountability are going to address the goals that you set out as an organisation. Having a more diverse workforce gives us the necessary talent to address those challenges**

# ng your decision making?



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people personally and mould them. For bigger businesses, that becomes a problem. Then you need a totem that tells everybody how they are expected to behave and execute strategy. Having a positive ESG policy helps in the execution."

Damian Saunders, Managing Director of Mid-Market, Wholesale and TV Hospitality Divisions, Sky Business, shared insights into how Sky went about its own leadership transformation. "In the UK, Sky has 38,000 people and we've been through an evolution," he commented. "Now, everyone can articulate why ESG and D&I is important and how it links to business performance. From the CEO to the front line we are measured in two ways: What are we doing? And how do we do it? The 'how' is about values, how we expect people to operate. Unless you can demonstrate the values and deliver the 'what' you're never going to be successful at Sky. We've gone through that shift."

### Talent acquisition

Prioritising talent acquisition is also key and interconnected with a number of other important leadership challenges, observed James Baker, Managing Director, Cloud, Giacom. "Talent and growth are intertwined - and you need to

ask how ESG, D&I and accountability are going to address the goals that you set out as an organisation, and the challenges," he stated. "ESG and D&I won't fix all of these challenges but if you recruit the right people the customers' issues, challenges and concerns can be addressed.

## By 2030, 70 per cent of the workforce will be millennial or Gen Z. For them, diversity, purpose and the environment are front of mind

Having a more diverse workforce gives us the necessary talent to meet those challenges.

"ESG and D&I are big scary topics to consume, and perhaps some of the sentiment in the channel is that they have businesses to run, revenue to generate, and shareholders. That's where shining a light on the challenges and opportunities, and providing information on the successes of organisations that have

seen improvements through ESG and D&I, helps to show how it fits into strategy."

Platt added: "We as networks and vendors have a responsibility to help the channel community. One of the things I will take away from this session is sharing what we do from an ESG perspective with partners to help them make a difference when talking to customers. We see ESG frequently in tenders and need to arm partners with the information they need to respond effectively."

Given the importance of the major leadership transformations at hand, Adam Zoldan, Director, Knight

Corporate Finance, placed the conversation in the context of shareholder value. "To date we haven't been able to raise the value of a business through ESG or D&I," he said. "It is on the agenda, and I've seen in due diligence questions where a minimum level is required. This is still on the compliance rather than the value side. But we can take from this discussion that these factors are moving up the agenda and I expect to see more of this impacting deals moving forward."



# Why it's time to think more

The word 'culture' may well be a 'soft' signifier, but the hard facts about its critical role in today's businesses cannot be ignored, according to thought leaders at this year's gold standard Comm Vision conference.

**C**ulture is best developed with consistency and authenticity, and the axiom that culture eats strategy for breakfast holds fast, believes Alex Tempest, Managing Director, BT Wholesale, who outlined the importance of authenticating cultural declarations with effective actions around inclusivity especially. "Prioritisation is key and that starts with inclusivity," she said. "If we're all the same, where are you getting that difference? Culture attracts strong talent and we need to inspire people through our purpose."

The Comms Dealer research showed how competitive advantage may be significantly weakened by cultural shortfalls, and Steve Hackley, Managing Director, Sky Business, highlighted ways to address and resolve some of the key culture related challenges. "You have to see it to be able to do it," he commented. "Culture defies definition. In Sky, we use employee satisfaction surveys as the marker for culture. They give you a lot of ways to calibrate, and the mass of data helps answer the question of how to move the

cultural dial in a positive way. It's maths-based and that cuts through the subjectivity, giving you ways to target interventions that help drive a better sense of purpose, more collaboration and better executive engagement. That's how you translate culture into competitive advantage."

### Small steps

Raza Baloch, Head of Business Partners, Virgin Media O2 Business, pointed to another set of actions that help organisations develop important cultural traits and behaviours that could strengthen their competitive stance. "When you look at culture, how do you start to change?," he stated. "One way to do this is to make it more bite-size. You may have work culture, social culture, support culture and equity culture. Consider whether you are hierarchical, overly bureaucratic and supporting employees in the right way. Focusing on small wins by breaking culture down into subsets has a butterfly effect."

For those business leaders grappling with culture management within a changing and fast moving

market, Andy Smethurst, Channel Sales Director, Gamma, offered perspectives that may help prevent culture becoming stagnant. "You've got to understand whether you've done a good job of communicating what your values are to people – that becomes more complex considering how people work in the organisation," he commented. "And having communicated your core values are you then celebrating the successes of those people that live them? There may be remote workers who feel less in touch with the organisation. Do you celebrate the value they bring? And have you created a feedback loop?"

Clearly, having a full grasp of culture and its impact on organisations is essential. But leadership coach Cally Beaton noted that in her experience many business executives 'think they have all the answers'. "We need to clear the path for brilliance and to let influences and differences come to the fore," she said. "The best wisdom comes from the most unlikely conversations and the most unlikely places. Let the learning come to you and be humble enough to let it in."



**Purpose is what activates strategy. It's where you bring emotion and human elements to the businesses. We will fail to deliver on our objectives if we don't activate the strategy with a culture that is more emotionally purpose driven**



# ore deeply about culture



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Hackley noted that hierarchy can be helpful in driving strategy, but culture can be driven out at any level by the people who care and know it best. "I resist the notion that culture has to be an artefact of hierarchy," he added. "Purpose is what activates strategy. It's where you bring emotion and human elements to the businesses. We will fail to deliver on our objectives if we don't activate the strategy with a culture that is more emotionally purpose driven."

### Walking the walk

Embracing the opportunity to build on an organisation's reputation as being purposeful and inclusive means truly turning words into action, emphasised Tempest. "You have to walk the walk," she stated. "If we don't make time for this we're not going to achieve in any way shape or form. Culture is a soft word and some struggle with its meaning and how to deploy it. But if you don't walk the walk and learn what those challenges are, whether it's ethnicity or disability for example, then you're not going to understand how to help and support those who are brave enough to put themselves forward. If you're a top level leader in an organisation you have to rapidly understand these challenges."

Tempest shared insights into BT's 'walking on eggshells' initiative where people have a platform to say 'this is what I suffer with in everyday life, and this is how you can help me'. "Inclusive programmes like this enable you to learn," she added. "They go some way in creating an engaged

and often the people who can action things are not in senior positions," added Beaton. "They are colleagues at different stages in their career, and allowing their opinions to become part of how we engender change is important. Underestimate younger generations at your peril."

## The best wisdom comes from the most unlikely conversations and the most unlikely places. Let the learning come to you and be humble enough to let it in

workforce that delivers successful outcomes. You create an organisation where people aren't afraid to speak up, they feel listened to and heard, and then put 100 per cent into helping themselves and the business to be successful."

One of the clearest action points identified in the discussion relates to whether cultural goals are actually reflected in the real-world experiences of staff. "It's about turning words into action,

At the centre of this argument is the issue of potential cultural misalignment between leadership and employees, and in this context Hackley observed that a primary cultural motivation can be linked to the adage that problems should be shared. "One of the quick wins is to engage the organisation in the culture

war and make it a distributed solve, instead of deciding your cultural icons and strategy and then cramming it down into the organisation," he commented. "Assign responsibility to people to come up with the answers and watch the magic that happens. Push culture out and let it come back to you. It's not just about empowerment, it's invitation too, freeing people to own the culture, to speak up and be part of it. There is an

**Continued on page 32**



Continued from page 31 important nuance that distinguishes empower and invite."

It is true that cultural priorities are different for each organisation, but the factor that unites them all is that there is no excuse for not making time to 'look after your employees', noted Baloch. "You can't say you don't have time to look after your employees, and yet have time to focus on delivering on a number – the two are intrinsically linked," he emphasised. "This is a mindset shift. Issues around budget and time impacting culture development could be excuses. Time and budget holding back culture development is a nonsense."

It is generally accepted that by far the most important cultural enabler is top level leadership, but there is a question as to whether leaders are targeting their cultural development strategies on the right critical areas. "When employees see the leadership teams make decisions – which is what leaders do – they want to be part of the process," noted Smethurst. "That's important. But people may not give enough time to realise that culture and strategy are not mutually exclusive. Culture brings together the strategy and you have to make time to understand that."

The advantages of emphasising cultural traits in this way can only be fully maximised if the conversation is ongoing and remains a day-to-day priority, noted Baloch. "Culture is ever evolving, so you have to be able to adapt," he commented. "We are in what is technically and ageing industry and we struggle to hire new generational employees, therefore we have to continually evolve. We work with technology which is constantly changing, and

## We need to develop cultures that enable difference and failure. Perfectionism is the enemy of success, so you may as well square up to failure

we embrace it, but from a cultural and employee standpoint we're not so good at embracing them."

Tempest noted that change does not happen overnight and that when events like Covid come along you have to react. "One of the challenges many companies are going through is the post-Covid home, hybrid and office working culture," she added. "We have a proportion of people who don't come into the office at all. It's challenging, but we find a way of creating a collaboration culture. It requires leaders to think differently and deeply."

According to Beaton, opportunities to build on an organisation's reputation as being purposeful will likely be missed unless 'everyone has a voice and makes the edit'. "When I do panel shows, which are still very much male dominated, it's not about saying the right or the funniest thing, it's getting your voice into the room so that there's no choice but to keep you in the edit," she explained. "We still allow the loudest voices in the room to dominate."

At the centre of this debate is inclusion, and Beaton noted that neurodiversity inclusion, for example, is about developing a culture that embraces not being perfect, along with business leaders understanding that they don't have all the answers. "We need to develop cultures that enable difference and failure," she added. "Perfectionism is the enemy of success, so you may as well square up to failure." ■

### More key points to consider...

**Raza Baloch, Head of Business Partners, Virgin Media O2 Business**

You can't execute on a strategy without having the right culture in place. They are intrinsically linked.

**Steve Hackley, Managing Director, Sky Business**

You just have to engage. Businesses are full contact high engagement environments and you've got to get messy.

**Andy Smethurst, Channel Sales Director, Gamma**

You've got to create a business case for culture and in some instances make a budget for it. You cannot leave culture to chance.

**Raza Baloch, Head of Business Partners, Virgin Media O2 Business**

It all starts with your purpose. You can't drag people along. You have to inspire and motivate them to believe in and adhere to a set of values. This drives the culture of a business.

**Cally Beaton, Leadership Coach**

Perfectionism is the enemy of success, so you may as well square up to failure.



# Channel reality check

**Comms Dealer research has crystallised a critical question facing the channel: To what extent do vendors and partners need to work closer together to unlock current and future market potential? In addressing these pressing issues, Comms Vision thought leaders doubled down on how the channel could be far more effective at converting market opportunities into sustainable, differentiation-led growth.**

**W**e know from our research that many channel companies may fall behind and be less able to react to what's coming next unless knowledge sharing challenges are addressed, wider opportunities are embraced and the channel ecosystem becomes more tightly interconnected. And during the Comms Vision Technology and Markets Insight session, thought leaders discussed the technology and partnership levers that may need to be pulled to create long-term growth by closing the technology and go-to-market gap.

That 60 per cent of the business leaders surveyed do not feel they are maximising growth opportunities in their own back yard represents an opportunity for upstream suppliers to rethink partner engagement models and align their product strategies, roadmaps and support mechanisms more closely with partners.

The need for upstream suppliers to provide leadership and direction, and become a better match for partners in terms of driving channel growth, is crystal clear. "Busy entrepreneurs don't always have the space to step back the way we do, spend time with markets and analysts and understand technology trends," stated Nathan Marke, Chief Operating Officer, Giacom. "We have an important role to play in condensing all of this information and communicating that through to channel businesses. We've got to find the growth now and chase it. It's our job to feed that information through."

There is a general consensus among thought leaders that the mismatch between vendor messaging and what many partners are actually experiencing is impacting growth, largely caused by low levels of education delivered via vendor-partner engagement. "The job of the channel is to make sure we are empowering resellers with the information they need to talk to their



## Validating market opportunities is a challenge for resource strapped channel companies. Unless this gap is bridged the status quo will persist

customers," commented Matt Worboys Business Development Director, Gamma. "Resellers want to know what's in it for them and how to take products to market. These products are largely the same – the value is in empowering resellers and making it simple for them."

These issues provide food for thought, not just for ICT resellers and MSPs, but also for technology vendors because, on another level, taking new products to market is a complicated process. "There is a big difference between a product being launched and truly embedded," commented Neil Wilson, Chief Product & Marketing Officer, TalkTalk Wholesale Services. "You can get new products over the line and technically out, but with a channel community there's a lag between a product being launched and sales teams being confident with it. This takes time and patience. Sales people generally don't like leaving their comfort zone and we have to empower partners to overcome that challenge."

Turning to current tech opportunities, Gavin Murphy, Propositions Principal, BT Wholesale, observed that the majority of the market has

**Continued on page 34**



## The need for upstream suppliers to provide more leadership, direction and market information, and become a better match for channel partners in terms of driving their growth, is crystal clear

### Continued from page 33

adopted cloud services. "But how many are truly generating the value that cloud can provide?" he commented. "For example, most resellers are not selling analytics, therefore customers are not getting the information they need to make informed decisions and maximise their cloud services. As an industry we can get carried away with technology and the future, yet we have great technology here and now that businesses can actually use."

That said, our survey found that many reseller/MSP business leaders are open to new ideas about technology and product innovation, with 63 per cent planning to move into a technology market not yet addressed by their business. Significantly, and symptomatic of broader issues, 5G did not feature at all in their planning. Emma Keedwell, Head of Innovation, Vodafone Business, noted: "As an operator, we need to share more stories around our trials and where we are delivering 5G, but also be honest about some of the challenges. With the channel being so close to end users we also need to hear from them to understand more about their customers."

Keedwell reported that 5G is on top of all businesses' minds and will unlock a transformation with throughput application being better and faster, while some areas of business 'will be unlocked in ways that we don't know'. "The application for 5G is relatively early so we need the channel to help us prioritise by industry and vertical the top three uses cases. That's the opportunity."

Murphy cited end user research undertaken by BT in which 70 per cent of businesses said 5G is 'absolutely critical'. But despite this apparent demand, the message is yet to land as a real opportunity for the channel. For future 5G potential to be realised it seems that the free flow of important information must be a two way system between resellers and vendors, which is likely to be a challenge in practice. "I don't understand the value proposition for 5G into SMB," stated Marke. "That's fundamentally one of the problems. We see case studies coming through about network slicing for large enterprise applications, but for most of our SMB customers it doesn't mean anything. That's the issue."

### Start with the customer

Paul Heritage-Redpath, Head of Products, CityFibre, added: "If you look at the UK business market, the vast majority is SME. The good news is that we are all pretty good at doing the core connectivity, but 5G isn't featuring highly because manufacturers are struggling to articulate a use case for most of the UK's SMEs. That's not to say it won't come. The power of story telling is where the channel is brilliant. That's where we can all focus again. From a product perspective you start with the customer and the problem they are trying to solve and offer a solution. You should never fall into the trap of thinking you have a cool widget then ask what you can do with it."

Resolving this conundrum could unlock significant opportunities for many channel companies. This also holds true for upstream suppliers who grasp

the nettle and put their shoulders into better enabling channel partners. "We know the world is changing, we know channel partners are being asked to go broader and deeper and to provide one-stop-shops and do a lot more," said Marke. "Yet most of these businesses are quite small, sub-£10 million and can't afford big contract teams. So the responsibility is on us if we are going to make this work. We need to make this as easy as possible for partners and give them confidence. They have the best sales teams out there."

Wilson added: "We have a huge amount of expertise that's never been turned into something that the channel can use. For example, security is a tough market to get into but we have strength and depth in delivering that to the



channel as a managed service that's white labelled. We are working on an overlay play."

These knowledge gaps prompt the question of whether markets, customers and partners are being underserved. And if they are, what's the implication for channel players? Furthermore, the shelf-life of a channel firm unable to provide the full product and service suite, today and tomorrow, may be getting shorter. There is clearly an opportunity for upstream providers to truly provide leadership and get more strategic with their channel strategies. "We as a vendor have to enable confidence and competence and give all our teams, and our customers' teams, everything they need to be successful," commented Murphy. "There is progress, but also a long way to go for suppliers to underpin partner and customer success."

That innovation drives growth is not in question, but there is an issue around how the channel leverages innovation and brings growth potential to fruition. "It's far easier for us to innovate than the OTT players," stated Keedwell. "The world is changing, people are subject to competition law and it's difficult to understand how best to innovate. If we really work together we can understand which technologies our customers want and how they are going to use them. We must spend more time with the channel to understand what they can add to core products. It's about cementing the partnership."

Closer, more interactive partnerships are key because validating market opportunities is a challenge for many resource strapped channel companies, and unless this gap is bridged the status quo will persist. In this context, Marke hammered home the point and reiterated the criticality of knowledge sharing. "We have lots of data about where the growth categories are and we need to share that better," he said. "For example, if you look at SMB wallet share, about 40 per cent or less is in telecoms and 60 per cent is in IT managed services. The fast growth categories are cloud, infrastructure, platforms and SaaS, particularly in SMB around

## There is clearly an opportunity for upstream providers to truly provide leadership and get more strategic with their channel strategies

infrastructure software where there is high double digit growth. All of these environments need to be secured so there is growth in security. The good news for the channel is that all of this needs to be built and run for SMBs. If you get it right there is a massive opportunity to grow – and you will be the one customers want to talk to about AI in the next round."

### Adding value

In terms of where growth will come from, Worboys pointed out that Microsoft intends to take 'massive share' in the SMB space. "So think about how you can add value around that, whether licensing, voice enabling or the peripherals," he said. "Mobile and IoT will be a significant growth area for Gamma over the next three to five years. And in the SMB area we're increasingly seeing consumers demand enterprise class functionality when communicating with SMEs, therefore they need to operate and respond with products that enable them to deliver on expectations. Customer experience in the SME sector is key. But the enablement piece is where the true value lies, that's the biggest growth area within Gamma. It's our responsibility to make sure we are providing partners with the right tools."

Heritage-Redpath highlighted the 'huge opportunity' for partners to get the basics right with connectivity across the UK. "You get the solid foundation in and then layer up

services," he added. "If you spin the story you will win big time in this market."

For Murphy, a big narrative is the full fibre story which is entering a new chapter. "The exchange closure kicks off in anger soon," he commented. "Stop-sell happened in September and the next two stages are on plan to deliver... we have stop-serve at the end of 2025 and complete closure in 2030. Analysts are saying that organisations with above average copper-based services could potentially impact their risk profile for private equity investments. It's therefore important to focus on having an above average FTTP base and migrate customers to drive value."

Ultimately, being competitive and driving growth means having the agility to respond effectively to the evolving market, and for resellers and MSPs this in large part hinges on their technology propositions and capabilities. But a lack of skills, a need for support, and a lack of market knowledge and product leadership is hindering growth. On this point, Wilson emphasised: "Partner enablement is not a one-off exercise. When you're taking people into new areas, giving dedicated focused support over time to grow confidence is key." ■

## More key points to consider...

### Paul Heritage-Redpath, Head of Products, CityFibre

We have a once in a lifetime event where every customer has to do something and we need to gear up to support all of those businesses.

### Emma Keedwell, Head of Innovation, Vodafone Business

You can't get away from verticals. People buy and use technology differently and there are vertical nuances in how simple technology is used. All government funded bids are coming out in verticalisation. If you can, celebrate it. If not, try it.

### Neil Wilson, Chief Product & Marketing Officer, TalkTalk Wholesale Services

It can be tremendously powerful when you own a vertical, speak the language and be at the core of it. But getting there requires a lot of investment.

### Matt Worboys Business Development Director, Gamma

Our job is to support the channel to get into verticals, help them get on the frameworks, help with marketing literature so partners are talking the right language with pricing that works.

### Gavin Murphy, Propositions Principal, BT Wholesale

As an industry we don't make it easy. We love acronyms and no-one is challenging the TLA attitude. That means we don't follow through with value-based outcomes that impact the end customer.





# Unprecedented levels of

**Unleashing the full power of strategic alliances and maximising the value of collaboration for a competitive advantage is an accelerating trend in the channel, and to get a window on this important development Comms Dealer research shed light on the factors driving the expansion of partnerships, providing food for thought among channel leaders during the conference.**

**T**he expansion of industry collaboration is essential to the future success of the channel, according to 90 per cent of the reseller/MSP business leaders we spoke to in our Channel Collaboration research. Furthermore, 92 per cent expect to see more collaboration between like-minded organisations in the channel over the coming two years, and they agree that collaboration in all its forms makes their world of opportunity bigger and more disruptive. It's a viewpoint echoed by Tom Robinson, Head of Commercial Indirect, Vodafone Business. "The conversations I'm having with channel partners are more entrepreneurial," he said. "They are disruptive and creative. They're conversations that probably wouldn't have taken place 18-24 months ago. The greater willingness and openness to sharing risk and reward allows us to have very different conversations that traditionally would not have taken place."



Many channel's business leaders are addressing the challenge of finding growth in a complex and transforming ICT market by expanding their focus. Given this sentiment, it's not surprising that over 80 per cent of business leaders think the channel needs to elevate supply chain collaboration as an absolute priority – and two thirds say upstream suppliers could do better at collaborating with channel partners. "Greater collaboration is going to be an underpinning requirement," emphasised Dale Parkinson, Managing Director, Connectivity, Giacom. "There is a good reason for that: We are at a point of generational technology change and end user customers are stacking their businesses in the cloud. That opens up a fantastic opportunity to sell an ever widening range of products and solutions. Collaboration has to be at the heart of this."

The move towards more collaboration puts a spotlight on how the channel is reacting in agile ways to a transforming comms market that is growing in complexity against a backdrop

## How we collaborate as a community is fundamental to driving momentum across the channel

of evolving demand factors, observed Gavin Jones, Channel Partners Director, BT Wholesale. "Technology is changing fast," he stated. "We saw massive change during the pandemic and all-IP is making things more software based. The world we operate in is faster, more dynamic and there's many more solutions – therefore you need a range of partners. The old days of exclusivity are long gone because you can't address all of the opportunities. Collaborative partnerships that enable you to adapt at the speed of the market are critical."

### Direct conversations

According to Sam Weller, Head of Wholesale, Sky Business, this means working harder at having more direct conversations. "The barrier can be that we are all busy – there's lots of people to see and support – and there may be a limited

number of subject matter experts," he said. "But creating a community, as Comms Vision has done, allows us to exchange ideas, exchange thoughts and challenge each other, which is healthy. The decisions we make about who we partner with and take our learnings from are absolutely critical as we scale our business in the channel."

But maximising the rewards of collaboration is not a guaranteed result of joining forces, meaning that strategic alliances must always be kept on track and the success factors maximised. For 86 per cent of business leaders the trend towards greater collaboration has brought trust forward as a key factor. According to the majority of this cohort, trust is not one dimensional, with most saying that trust between their business and partners has become more multifaceted. "Risk

# f industry collaboration

traditionally can be a bit taboo," said Robinson. "It's the conversation that people try to avoid. But with greater transparency and a degree of openness around facing into risk up-front, that helps build trust. Alongside risk comes reward. As long as we are open and collaborative in how we address that, and align and gain consensus on how we apportion risk and reward, then that's beneficial for the partnership."

## Building trust

According to our research, among those with a strategic focus on building greater trust in their business, over half (52 per cent) say trust is manifested through greater visibility and transparency, while closer communication is the main foundation of trust for 32 per cent. In this context, it is worth noting that nearly all expect to shift their focus onto

## The need for greater collaboration becomes ever more pressing among channel companies wanting to elevate their organisational purpose

future innovations, but only 18.5 per cent currently leverage alliances to boost innovation, probably due in large part to perceived risk.

"The reality is that you can't have innovation without some risk," stated Paul Smith, Chief Sales Officer (Partners), TalkTalk Wholesale Services. "We need to be bold in how we work with collaboration. There's a massive ICT space out there that's very new to many partners and feels quite risky. Partners have great relationships with their customers, and collaboration allows you to work with other partners and take different approaches. So be OK with risk and explore it."

Robinson added: "Collaboration drives innovation, so greater collaboration is fundamental to the needs and wants of the industry we are servicing. There is a more openness and willingness to collaborate and we are on the start of something quite interesting. In terms of partners and conversations with customers, there's almost an expectation for collaboration which we've not seen to this degree before. Innovation in isolation is dangerous and hard to do. And how we collaborate as a community is fundamental to driving momentum across the channel."

It is good news that over 80 per cent of reseller/ MSP business leaders in our survey think the channel needs to elevate supply chain collaboration as an absolute priority, and it's fair to say that they have a head start. "From a comms perspective, partners have been collaborating at a local level for many years," commented Parkinson. "But the technology change we are going through will substantially change that, especially when you consider what SMBs want from the partners that we serve. This may change how organisations need to work together at a channel level and across the vendor community.

"We are moving away from volume-based programmes to the vendor community effectively orchestrating an ecosystem of partners with a multiple set of disciplines because, ultimately, that is what customers will be asking for. Broadening out capability and portfolio through collaboration is a fantastic opportunity for the channel."

Furthermore, by overlaying the expansion of alliances with the demands of ESG goals the requirement for collaboration becomes ever more pressing among channel firms wanting to elevate their organisational

purpose. "There is an opportunity to explore meeting ESG targets with partners," said Robinson. "Organisations will be at different stages on their ESG journeys. It's front and centre for us, and there is an opportunity for partners to take advantage of our knowledge and understanding. There is synergy in information sharing."

## Focus on ESG

According to Parkinson, in terms of vendor-to-vendor and vendor-into-channel partners, much more needs to be done on ESG. "It's not just about net zero or key parts of an ESG policy, there are adjacent topics – like digital inclusion, rural broadband and supporting the most vulnerable people in society – that we can have a bigger impact on by working together more effectively," he stated. "Everyone stands to gain."

That value and growth will be enhanced by maintaining ESG compliance is beyond question, and an observation made by Andy Wilson, Sales Director, Wholesale Channel, CityFibre, serves as a harbinger of what's to come. "In our supply chain we are actively choosing partners who have a low emission carbon plan," he commented. "Equally, we recently won a big rural scheme in

Cambridgeshire and one of the primary points in contract negotiations was around showing our ESG commitments. In general, collaboration reflects the continual evolution of what is effectively an ecosystem. Gone are the days of supplier-customer and supplier-partner relationships. To be successful in this market you've got to add value through working together."

**Comms Vision 2024 in pictures – page 38**

## More key points to consider...

### Gavin Jones, Channel Partners Director, BT Wholesale

Everybody should be sharing skills, knowledge, experience and innovation. In this changing world no-one can be an expert in everything.

### Tom Robinson, Head of Commercial Indirect, Vodafone Business

The partner community informs, educates, provides insight and has a level of entrepreneurial spirit that helps guide and shape our thinking as operators.

### Andy Wilson, Sales Director, Wholesale Channel, CityFibre

From an altnet perspective, and as a challenger in that market, working with other alternative network providers is critical.

### Paul Smith Chief Sales Officer (Partners), TalkTalk Wholesale Services

Regulations can make everyone more risk averse, but if you go down that route you stop innovating. There needs to be a strong voice around pushing forward. Shared goals drive change but we can do more, and everyone should be open to what collaboration can bring. It's a win-win.

### Sam Weller, Head of Wholesale, Sky Business

Sky Zero commits us to being carbon neutral by 2030, and the thought, effort and innovation that goes into delivering against those commitments gives us insight. It's incumbent on resellers in the channel to demand that insight of their suppliers, even though their mindset might just be around hard numbers and growth.

### Gavin Jones, Channel Partners Director, BT Wholesale

Microsoft Teams is ubiquitous across a lot of organisations but there is a complexity to rolling Teams out that partners need to address. This is where collaboration comes in. Helping partners to educate, be aware and be able to sell such services is our role.





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# Conference in pictures



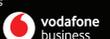

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 8<sup>TH</sup>, 9<sup>TH</sup> & 10<sup>TH</sup> NOVEMBER 2023

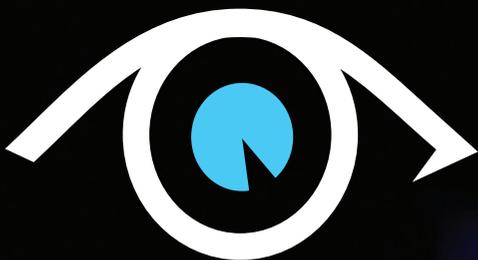
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