



Commsworld
CEO outlines big
expansion plans p16



Incoming IPI chief
sets ambitious triple
growth target p20

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(Continued on page 4).

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consolidation move by Focus
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page 3 for the full story.

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This month's
movers and shakers



Onecom snares close rival Olive

LDC-backed Onecom's acquisition of close rival Buckinghamshire-based Olive Communications creates a comms channel powerhouse with a combined annual turnover of more than £140m.

SPECIAL REPORT

The acquisition marks a new phase in Onecom's development and merges two of Vodafone's biggest partners under one roof led by Olive's Chief Executive Martin Flick who is now CEO of Onecom Group.

Darren Ridge founded Onecom in 2002 and grew the business to more than £90m annual revenues helped by a buy and build strategy. He remains a shareholder and Non-Executive

Director and said he viewed Olive as 'healthy competitors for years'.

"The inevitable changes to working patterns across the UK and globally as a result of the pandemic have accelerated the need for integrated cloud communications and increased demand for transformation and digitalisation," stated Ridge.

"Bringing these two businesses together will benefit our customers, partners, stakeholders and employees."

Flick added: "Our ultimate objective this year is to help customers navigate the pandemic and be market-ready to transform, adapt and evolve their businesses with cloud communications technologies." (Continued on page 4).

The deal was closely followed by another significant consolidation move by Focus Group which acquired Exeter-based swcomms, creating a £100m combined business. See page 3 for the full story.

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EDITOR'S COMMENT



Stuart Gilroy

IN THE Covid-19 pandemic the ICT channel has been relied upon by Britain's private and public sector as never before. And as we come out of lockdown that reliance will not diminish as tactical quick fix home worker solutions continue to come under

review. In fact, it is likely that the channel's influence across all sectors of the market will strengthen as organisations seek to deploy technology enabled long-term strategic answers to their challenges, as their reliance on office environments shifts to domestic settings. That's not all: When you also consider the fast approaching 2025 switch off and march of full fibre, the time for the channel to lead by example will far outlive the worst ravages of coronavirus.

This coming year, with remote working becoming the norm and all-IP topping the agenda, many traditional resellers may need to face a moment of truth and re-evaluate their principle assets, turning their attention to the cloud and hosted comms, away from PBXs and the associated lump sum annual maintenance contract. This is indeed a time for tough decisions, but the chances are they could be among the best decisions made in a decade.

Unsurprisingly, such matters of great importance continue to be scrutinised in the pages of this magazine. Another familiar feature is Comms Dealer's focus on championing all inspirational aspects of influential channel companies and executive leaders, all deserving of industry-wide recognition. In this vein, it was with great pleasure that Comms Dealer announced last month the first 'live physical' channel awards event since lockdown, Channel Champions, the new event borne out of the Comms Dealer Sales & Marketing Awards which goes alfresco on July 1st (see page 10).

It will no doubt be a great time for progressive channel figures to socialise and catch up – while others, less forward looking, may be too preoccupied with playing a different kind of catch-up.

Stuart Gilroy, Editor

Focus snaps up swcomms



Ralph Gilbert

FOCUS Group's business portfolio and influence in the south west region have been significantly boosted by the acquisition of swcomms. The deal was sparked by the retirement of swcomms Chairman and CEO Tony Rowe and creates a £100m revenue business.

"Focus Group has been looking to expand its portfolio of businesses and swcomms was a perfect fit to accelerate our growth in the south west of the UK," said Ralph Gilbert, co-founder at Focus Group.

"With its expansion of data centre technologies, just one of the few located in this region, this creates opportunities for Focus Group and further investments for the future."

Gilbert said swcomms will continue to operate under its brand name with the existing management team and employees working out of its head office in Exeter.

Swcomms MD Brian Lodge commented: "The acquisition will coincide with some great opportunities in the market due to a shift in the industry towards clouds connectivity, home working and Openreach's withdrawal of copper voice and Internet services.

"Together we will be more competitive and we plan to grow the business significantly in the next few years. Being part of the Focus Group will give us all the wider benefits of a £100m turnover business."

Phoenix in MBO deal with LDC

AN LDC backed MBO at Bucks-based Phoenix Datacom puts the security firm on the road to portfolio expansion with the potential for acquisitions.

The deal sees former UK President of BT Global Services and CEO of Alternative Networks Mark Quartermaine join as Non-Executive Chairman.

"We're seeing a high demand from organisations wanting to ensure they have cutting edge technology to scale their networks and protect against cyber threats," said MD John Carson, who spearheaded the MBO.

"With LDC's support we will be able to maximise this opportunity so that we can build, scale and enhance our product and service offering."

Chris Morris, Investment Director at LDC, added: "The team at Phoenix Datacom has a 30-year track record of providing secure data network solutions to a blue-chip client base."

Phoenix Datacom was established in 1984 and serves blue-chip clients including financial institutions, network operators, media businesses, broadcasters and public sector organisations.

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NEWS ROUNDUP

THE impact of Covid-19 on sectors such as education, healthcare and transport has catalysed a 500% hike in IoT data usage by Pangea partners. The upsurge nearly doubled Pangea's annual revenue growth rate from 42% to 95% in 2020. The company also on-boarded 75 new partners last year boosting total numbers to 300-plus. MD Dan Cunliffe stated: "IoT helped to keep the world turning through 2020 and it continues to shape the future. Every industry is brimming with IoT opportunities right now. The benefits that IoT offers – connectivity, efficiency, safety, sustainability – have never been more important."

GRAPHITE Capital-backed Babble has ramped up its buy and build campaign with the acquisition of SME and education specialist Activ Technology. The Newcastle-based MSP is Babble's second buy under PE partner Graphite, its largest acquisition so far and sixth deal in the last 12 months. Babble CEO Matt Parker said: "This year we expect to complete more acquisitions as we continue to seek innovative businesses that think the same way as us and grow the capabilities we can provide to our customers."

Lake aims to expand on results



Jamie Lake

PURE Cloud Solutions has reported a 20% uplift in revenues to £5.4m attributed to its mobile-centric approach to home working enablement.

The company has offices in Tamworth and Clydebank and won a hatful of contracts including deals with Birmingham City Football Club, Electrium, the Royal Shakespeare Company and SPS Aerospace.

Pure Cloud Solutions is working with business advisors and accountants Haines Watts on targeting a number of acquisitions. "We are taking on companies ten times our size and winning new contracts because clients want bespoke solutions, not an off-the-shelf option," stated MD Jamie Lake.

"Investment in the latest software and infrastructure means we can deliver what businesses need and this has been evident during the pandemic when our expertise in mobile-first solutions has come into its own."

Onecom set for big push

Continued from page 1

Onecom's transformative acquisition of Olive Communications was supported with follow-on funding from mid-market private equity firm LDC which invested in Onecom in a £100m deal in July 2019.

Growth capital investor BGF, which invested £10m into Olive in 2016, exited the business as part of the transaction.

One month prior to LDC's 2019 investment Onecom and Vodafone announced a five year deal estimated to be worth up to £600m in revenue.

The expanded Onecom Group will continue to be based at Whiteley, Hampshire.

Olive has grown organically and via acquisitions to more than £31m in annual revenue, pivoting its proposition in 2014 from mobile-only to become a cloud communications provider.

Flick commented: "Our combined scale, expertise and experience helps customers of all sizes to navigate their journey through the short and long-term economic landscape, leveraging technology from our established and emerging strategic partnerships, including Vodafone, Mitel, Google, Microsoft and others."

Yann Souillard, Head of London at LDC, noted: "This marks the third acquisition Onecom has made since we invested in the business in July 2019, and the combination of Olive and Onecom is a force to be reckoned within the UK B2B telecoms market."

Onecom has been recognised as Vodafone Strategic Partner of the Year for 10 years, while in 2020 Olive was awarded Vodafone's Innovation Partner of the Year Award.

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NEWS ROUNDUP

RESEARCH by Virgin Media Business and the Centre for Economics and Business Research (Cebr) suggests that investment in technology could deliver a £74bn boost to the UK economy in 2025, providing a 'once-in-a-generation' opportunity for resellers according to Virgin Media Business Wholesale MD Mike Hallam. "The connectivity channel will help drive digital transformation forward," he said. "Wholesale partners will be central to supplying the digital infrastructure, flexible and agile networks needed to support remote working and online customer demand, as well as the backhaul connectivity which is crucial to the 5G roll out."

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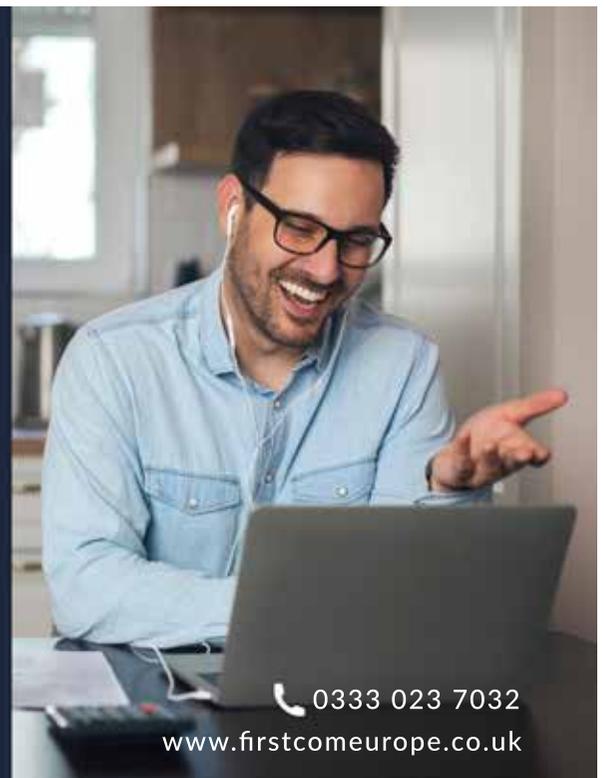
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Mills smooths M&A bumps



Julie Mills

M&A deals going to the wall because of integration issues will become a thing of the past following the roll out of a transaction advisory service by Support to Win, according to its CEO Julie Mills.

The company has developed a pre-transaction due diligence service for whole customer bases that fully assesses the migration challenge. "M&A deals will fall through if this looks too difficult," stated Mills.

"So we developed services for either sell-side or buy-side parties to make migrations and consolidations faster."

Mills noted that due diligence forms the basis of a com-

prehensive view of a customer's voice estate which can be managed post-transaction as part of a customer-by-customer migration plan.

"These include virtual PBX audit tools that reduce pre-migration fact-finds from weeks to minutes, and remote onboarding services that hand-hold customers to new services without costly, time-consuming on-site visits," added Mills. "That's good news for companies looking to sell at full valuation, as well as investing businesses with a low appetite for risk."

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NEWS ROUNDUP

A RICHER view of call reporting statistics will provide a boost to end user productivity, according to MyPhones Sales Director Paul Gibbs, referring to the launch of a new reporting tool for the MyPhones Altos hosted telephony platform which forms part of the standard licence. "The Insights suite responds to the increasing need for richer data analytics, which in turn enables businesses to drive productivity across remote locations," said Gibbs.

PRAGMA'S transformation into a cloud service provider has taken a major step forward with the launch of a WebRTC UCaaS solution. "iPECS ONE brings features for remote workers looking for a UC and collaboration tool," said Product Marketing Manager Andy Herring. Pragma reseller Berry Telecom has lauded the release as demand for collaboration solutions is set to increase. Co-founder Paul Hallam said: "iPECS ONE strengthens the collaborative engagement between our customers and their teams at a time when they need it most."

Incovo chief exec seals deal to join forces with Eta Delta

LIVINGSTON-based ICT company Incovo's technical capabilities and expansion plans have been boosted by a link-up with the IT services branch of Glasgow business Eta Delta.

The investment deal sees Eta Delta owner and Director James Myles become a Director and shareholder of Incovo which is headed up by 22-year-old CEO Chris Thomas.

"The deal bolsters Incovo's IT provision capabilities and enhances our ability to offer high-end IT support, cyber security consultancy and remote working implementation," stat-



James Myles and Chris Thomas

ed Thomas, who was a shoe shop assistant before taking the reins at Incovo in 2017, a year after the sudden death of his father Richard Thomas who founded the firm.

"We're approaching what would have been my father's

50th birthday," commented Thomas. "To expand into the world of IT is a natural progression for Incovo and I know my father would have been as enthusiastic as I am about this new chapter. This feels like the perfect way to honour him."



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NEWS ROUNDUP

GLOBAL omnichannel specialist QContact is targeting UK comms channel expansion, building on



partner programme successes in Europe, the USA and Africa.

Spearheading the UK push is Business Development Manager Edward Haines (pictured) who joined the company in late 2019. "QContact helps businesses integrate calls, emails, social media, WhatsApp and more with a CRM," he stated. "I'm now focused on developing new partnerships throughout the UK."

VIRTUAL1'S channel partners have gained access to CityFibre's business Ethernet infrastructure in its full fibre towns and cities across the UK. The link up also sees CityFibre leverage Virtual1's national network to deliver fibre options beyond its own full fibre footprint to provide off-net choice to partners. Virtual1 has interconnected with CityFibre to enable 600-plus channel partners to serve their business customers with a portfolio of 100Mbps to 1Gbps full fibre Ethernet products in 28 cities, expanding as CityFibre continues its roll out.

Too many firms still in the dark over 2025 switch-off

THE scale of the task facing channel companies with responsibility for transitioning customers to all-IP communications by 2025 has been put into sharp focus by research stats from Zen.

The study found that almost a quarter of businesses are unaware of the 2025 copper switch-off and preceding stop-sell plans from Openreach. In the SME segment specifically 33% of organisations remain in the dark.

Stop-sell first went live in December 2020 in Salisbury as part of a rolling plan put in place by Openreach.

"There is a growing risk that many businesses will be caught short by structural changes to the UK telecoms network which loom on the horizon," stated Zen CEO Paul Stobart.

"Keeping company technology up to date should be a continuous, evolutionary process, but the clock is ticking for those businesses still reliant on outdated communications tools such as traditional telephony."

Contract renewal and termination dates after 2025 were cited as likely sticking points.

James Lilley, Director of Managed Customer Migrations,



Paul Stobart

Openreach, added: "Alongside work we already do with industry to educate and inform we'll also soon be ready to announce a new business specific communications campaign to help provide the level of detail required for businesses to get ready and prepare for the copper stop-sell.

"This is an important time for industry and impacts all businesses as we modernise and build a full fibre network."

Zen's research also highlighted a significant opportunity for the comms channel to upgrade a large section of the market which is receptive to making investments in cloud comms technology. Almost half of respondents said they would invest in a cloud-based solution to integrate their communication channels.

Stobart added: "Cloud-based solutions can provide scalabil-

ity, accessibility and efficiency – all while replacing outdated voice systems with a unified solution. Therefore, the move

towards cloud communications looks set to accelerate.

"This is likely to form part of wider digital transformation efforts as organisations invest in new technologies that can come together to accommodate wider changes, such as the rise in remote working.

"Having a trusted partner is key to supporting this journey, to ensure that businesses are prepared for changes taking place around them, and that solutions are bespoke."

PRAGMA Group Director Will Morey has taken diversification to new levels during lockdown, entering the world of digital publishing in partnership with his eight-year-old son Jack, hoping to raise funds for hungry children in the UK. Home schooling took on a new meaning for Will when young Jack decided to write a book called *The Big Red Dinosaur* which he illustrated and stapled together. "We were very impressed when he said he wanted to sell the book and raise funds for Marcus Rashford's FareShare charity," said Will. "We downloaded an app for the iPad, created a digital version and *The Big Red Dinosaur* has come to life. It snowballed from there." As Comms Dealer went to print Jack had raised over £750 for FareShare and has set a target of £1,000. If you would like to donate please visit <https://www.justgiving.com/fundraising/thebigreddinosaur>



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Wise planning key to realising growth and exit ambitions

A WHITE paper produced by Knight Corporate Finance provides a best practice guide for business owners in the comms sector considering an exit.

The white paper takes a six step approach to helping potential sellers, focusing on where to start, timings, business value, readiness, approaches to selling and the role of advisors in optimising all areas in the context of a managed competitive process.

“Business owners are often immersed in the day-to-day operations of their organisation therefore dedicate little time, if any, to understanding how to ultimately turn their ambition into reality,” said Director Adam Zoldan.

“Every client is different so everything we do is bespoke, and the first question we ask is always – what are your aspirations for your business?”

The white paper also underscores how sellers can reap a higher value by exiting within a fostered competitive environment (versus off-market deals) orchestrated by advisors such as Knight Corporate Finance.

“We generate competition among buyers,” added Director Paul Billingham. “This is part of a disciplined sales process involving a number of parties that we have qualified as having the means and motivation to complete a deal.

“Most of our 120 transactions completed as a result of our competitive sales process but we have concluded a number of off-market deals.

“More often than not these have proven successful where there has been a pre-existing relationship rather than a cold-contact. But even when terms are agreed there is still a lot of work to achieve a comple-



Adam Zoldan and Paul Billingham

tion. The course of a transaction will last anywhere from four to nine months.

“Buyers and investors prefer off-market deals as there is no competition, but why would you not benchmark it against other options?”

Therefore taking steps towards an exit with cold feet should not be considered as a viable option, according to Zoldan and Billingham.

To help business owners prepare for a sale the corporate finance boutique has developed a bespoke product called Knight Vendor Assist which provides a dry run due diligence process.

“Knight Vendor Assist identifies potential issues and addresses them away from the heat of a transaction,” said Billingham.

That long-term planning is key to a successful exit is reflected in how Knight Corporate Finance engages with organisations, often before an exit plan is established, drawing out strategic ambitions and visions and matching those to value creating exit opportunities, according to Zoldan.

“Sometimes we start work on a deal from the start, but Knight often works with clients for months or years prior to a transaction,” he added.

SCC is sponsoring national children's charity Molly Olly's Wishes in a 12 month partnership that will see the IT solutions provider donate two 'wishes' per month. The 'wishes' go to children with life threatening or life limiting illnesses and constitute equipment, gifts or experiences averaging £500. Mike Swain, SCC UK CEO, said: "Molly Olly's Wishes is a wonderful charity that makes a tangible impact to the lives of unwell children and their families. It is crucial that businesses do all we can to give back and contribute positively to peoples' lives alongside our normal business operations." Rachel Ollerenshaw (pictured), Trustee of Molly Olly's Wishes, added: "We grant over 300 wishes per year to children based across the UK and SCC's sponsorship will help us reach many more children and families who need help."



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Channel Champions awards event to go alfresco on July 1st

CHANNEL Champions, the new event borne out of the Comms Dealer Sales & Marketing Awards, has been relocated to Regent's Park, London, and relaunched as an alfresco event on July 1st.

The decision was made by organisers BPL Business Media when it was clear that an indoor finals luncheon would not be possible in May due to the ongoing Covid-19 restrictions.

The event will now take place as a celebratory summer garden party with the awards ceremony staged in an open marquee followed by networking in London's most elegant Royal park.

"Initially, we will be limiting numbers to about 250 attendees, but it is our absolute intention to increase that number – restrictions allowing – to our usual 400-plus guests," stated BPL MD Mike O'Brien.

"We hope this will be the first networking opportunity our community can enjoy after months and months of lockdown and we are delighted that our main sponsor DWS is fully behind the initiative."

DWS CEO Terry O'Brien commented: "We are pleased the Comms Dealer team is determined to give people in our industry the event they deserve after working so hard during the pandemic and helping millions of key workers to keep Britain working. As headline sponsor of both this event and the Comms National Awards later in the year we are delighted to play our part in paying tribute to the amazing professionals in our fantastic industry."

"Staging Channel Champions in the open air with a festival atmosphere will make this an event to remember."



Terry O'Brien

Channel Champions will recognise sales, marketing, technical, billing and finance, executive leadership, sales support, customer service, HR, people and culture teams across the channel community.

Teams wishing to enter should register now at www.channel-champions.co.uk.

BPL's Awards Co-ordinator Nigel Sergent said: "This has been a tough year and Channel Champions will give companies a unique opportunity to honour

the teams that have helped them get through this challenging period and deliver some incredible solutions and services.

"We hope most channel organisations will want to get involved and give their teams the chance to receive some well deserved recognition."

For more information please contact Nigel Sergent, Editorial Director – nsergent@bpl-business.com – or BPL Event Manager Rachel Seymour – rseymour@bpl-business.com.

NEW NFON CEO Klaus Von Rottkay is planning to ramp up investment in the company's partner base and lead its post-Covid sales efforts. "We are looking to double down on investment, onboard new



partners and expand into our existing footprint," he said. "The need to modernise and digitise has become more apparent, even to the laggards, so it is going to become easier to convince people to make the move. We want to show that there is life after Covid." Rottkay holds a PHD in physics and joined the technology market in 2006 with Microsoft where he held various marketing and sales roles including Director of Enterprise Specialist Sales and COO/CMO of Microsoft Germany.

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Fibre-alternative proves top choice

More businesses are working from home than ever before due to Covid-19 but there is evidence to show that millions of them suffer from slow, poor quality and unreliable residential broadband. "We are seeing a fundamental shift with customers that urgently need support with poor broadband in residential settings," said Cloudcell Technologies Managing Director Kevin Boyle.

solution for businesses looking for better broadband and those currently stuck working from home. Having had the fibre-alternative service installed at their home offices, some of our channel partners' customers have given fantastic feedback."

The benefits of using Cloudcell EQ to deliver better connectivity at the office or whilst working from home can be transformative for the customer and channel



Kevin Boyle

"Partnering with Cloudcell Technologies allows channel partners to transform their customers' home working experience, while enabling a range of commercial opportunities during the Covid-19 pandemic."

He noted that many businesses believe that FTTP is the only way to achieve better broadband but with expensive excess construction charges of up to £73,000, problems obtaining wayleaves and long delays, FTTP is beyond the reach of many. "For them, bringing in a fibre-alternative solution makes sense because they simply cannot operate productively or reliably using their existing home broadband solution," added Boyle.

"Wireless broadband offers an alternative solution which exploits the SDWAN capabilities of Cloudcell EQ, a cost-effective fibre-alternative delivered by bonding up to 4 cellular (LTE, LTEA and 5G) connections with two fixed broadband connections. Offering increased speed, quality of service and lower latency, this is an ideal

partner alike. Offering the performance, reliability and resilience needed to run a successful business remotely, while enabling resellers to upsell and cross-sell solutions to both new and existing customers.

"Partnering with Cloudcell Technologies allows channel partners to transform their customers' home working experience, while enabling a range of commercial opportunities during the Covid-19 pandemic," added Boyle. "We believe that poor broadband should not hold businesses back. Our cellular connectivity solutions offer a range of contract durations that truly put a cost-effective alternative to fibre within the reach of every work-from-home business, of any size, in any location."

To find out more about partnering with Cloudcell Technologies to deliver a resilient, cost-effective fibre alternative broadband service to your customers, visit: www.cloudcelltechnologies.com/resellers call us on: **0333 0049 444** or email: hello@cloudcelltechnologies.co.uk

Mental wellbeing workshop opens minds at Virtual1

The sales team at channel-only cloud and connectivity business Virtual1 has been one of the first to benefit from a mental health and wellbeing workshop run by new ICT industry charity Mental Health Associates. The organisation was founded by comms industry veteran and CEO Peter Orr (who led the workshop) and comprises a group of trustees dedicated to alleviating the negative effects on mental health of the coronavirus pandemic and other stress points, urging all those affected to not suffer in silence.

Virtual1 Business Development Director Simon Durrant commented: "In 2019 we launched an internal Mental Health First Aid training course by MIND. We now have nine mental health first aiders trained to help employees find the support they need to stay well. The last 12 months have been dramatically different for all our people, and we have recognised that the sales environment during the pandemic has been even more pressured, not just for us, but for all businesses within our sector. So, we reached out to Peter to help our sales employees effectively manage their stress and to spot signs of early distress in the workplace and community. We had some great feedback from the team."

One team member stated: "I should have asked for help



Simon Durrant

rather than just trying to deal with it on my own. I thank Peter for being open about what he has been through himself. It shows that very successful people can encounter these issues too."

Durrant noted that another team member reached out to become an associate of MHA to continue their own development and to help support the wider team. "This has been a great initiative," he added.

Orr maintains that after a year of virtual working, checking in on the mental health and wellbeing of staff has never been more important. "Isolation is a theme emerging from calls and workshops, and staff are feeling the impact of the national restrictions and trying to deliver work targets without regular face-to-face contact with their team," he said.

"It is so important to recognise this and to

encourage people to talk. We believe companies would really benefit from MHA workshops and are keen to offer these to small and large ICT organisations. We can also join an existing meeting for a short agenda item to discuss mental health awareness. Early detection of poor mental health can help your teams get back on the road to success."

The free one-hour virtual workshops help with early detection of mental health difficulties and include understanding mental health, identifying when mental health is worsening, exploring through case studies, looking from a sales perspective and offering options for support. ■

For more information please visit www.mentalhealthassociates.co.uk. If you need help urgently call 03301 244 338. MHA needs your support – to donate please visit <https://uk.gofundme.com/f/mental-health-associates>

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Industry themes that wil

We are entering an era that will remain forever recognisable as post-Covid-19, and this new definition requires the guiding lights of education, clear communication and high-touch engagement as we accelerate into an unprecedented period of industry change, according to our panel of Channel Forecast experts.

Scrape the surface of the Covid-19 impacted comms landscape and you will find a myriad of requirements for partner and end user education. Other recurring themes emerging from last month's Comms Dealer Channel Forecast session include innovation, opportunity, the customer experience, succinct communication and market acceleration – all brought forward, in large part, into the context of the sales and marketing function.

The session reaffirmed that post-Covid-19 opportunities are beckoning but they need bringing to life, and Zen Partners Managing Director

Stephen Warburton is right to draw attention to the role of information exchange and managing data in activating greater growth. "An enormous technology change is going to happen over the next five years," he stated. "You can never do too much on education in terms of webinars, materials, communicating with the channel and giving partners tools to communicate with their end users. More than ever, we need to engage with our customers. That includes partners – we explore their challenges, listen to them, ask great questions and offer solutions."

It makes total sense to pursue a strategy of directing



Stephen Warburton

You can never do too much on education in terms of webinars, materials, communicating with the channel and giving partners tools to communicate with their end users.

more attention towards enlightening customers and partners, concurred Gamma Channel Director Andy Smethurst, who noted that his marketing teams are now an intrinsic part of gaining new business through the education of end customers. "It's got to be constant and intelligent in terms of messaging, picking up on certain verticals and pinch points," he said. "If net-new business is proving hard to come by, one of the biggest opportunities resides within channel partners' existing customer base. There's a huge opportunity to cross sell and target new business with messages that hone in on some of the pain points that people

have been experiencing over the last 12 months. We're now ready to take the opportunity to the next level and address operational performance. It's a consultative relationship that evaluates what customers are doing and what the channel partner could be offering. This is accelerated by the PSTN switch off."

Success factors

That education and marketing is seminal to future success is clear, and this requirement will not diminish according to Vaioni Wholesale founder and Managing Director Sachin Vaish. "There's a huge focus for us on marketing activity now," he stated. "We're

doing a lot around blogs, educational and thought leadership pieces, just to keep people abreast of developments and what we're seeing in the industry.

"We're also looking into our own base and getting partners to look within theirs, because through good conversations, whether via a webinar or a one-to-one, you start to understand the challenges that the end customer is facing. For example, we're using data to show us which businesses are seeing a drop off in bandwidth utilisation. That potentially tells us that staff are working from home. So let's talk to them and understand their situation. It comes back to basic things – high-touch, high interaction and utilising the marketing teams for what they're really good at – sending out clear communications and educating the industry and channel partners."

This vital job is perhaps undermined by those who throw a packet of acronyms into the air, only to fly in the face of clear communication. And the jargon debate is nowhere more pertinent than in the connectivity arena where a terminology cull is long overdue. "We need to get rid of some of the bull that comes with broadband versus full fibre,"



Andy Smethurst

Our industry should be setting the gold template for customer service. It centres around being contactable and accountable and that boils down to communication.

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Gamma



I define the next chapter

stated Vaish. “We need to be more straightforward. If seen as a dark art people lose interest. They find it difficult to embrace a technology that they’re not used to selling or talking about. I hope Openreach and some of the leading Altnets will make that change.”

What is clear is that the industry will not fulfil its potential if it fails to live up to its very purpose as a provider of optimised communications that support sublime customer experiences. “Our industry should be setting the gold template for customer service,” added Smethurst. “It centres around being contactable and accountable and that largely boils down to communication. Many people today would prefer to get in touch with you via web chat, instant message, give you a tweet, but their expectations haven’t changed. They want a prompt response and a quick

resolution. There is also an opportunity to consider supporting people to self-serve. It can be a useful tool but it must be in conjunction with everything else.”

Service differentiation and specialisation based on data insights also yields much by way of unlocking customer engagement opportunities, as Tollring CEO Tony Martino pointed out: “We’re starting to look more at verticalisation to identify what some of those challenges are and the problems we are able to solve,” he stated. “We’ve gone to the channel with vertical messages that enable them to look at things from a slightly different angle. Vertical alignment is key.

“Furthermore, to get an understanding of how well we’re performing in terms of the customer experience we need to leverage multiple sources of data and bring it together to provide strong actionable insights. Much



Tony Martino

We need to retain our customers in these difficult times. Customer service is critical, and having tools at your disposal to provide the highest level of customer interaction and engagement is crucial.

of our innovation has focused on this, to prepare us for the cloud journey we’re seeing today.”

Data is key

Strong demand for data insights thankfully matches its high availability. “We’re awash with data,” added Warburton. “Who can get FTTP, who’s going to be able to get FTTP – which stop-sell exchanges are going to go live, we’ve got data coming out of our ears. For partners, it’s about being able to interpret that data and make it meaningful. So we put together a campaign last year where we took all that information and allowed partners to log in, click on an exchange, a postcode, city or town and see what coverage is available now and in the future. That’s been popular. We’ve got 450 partners with access to those tools and they’re creating campaigns.”

Martino highlighted how Tollring’s marketing function is now far more integrated

with the sales operation and he also spotlighted how sales enablement is changing. “We’re getting a lot more traction from webinars,” he explained. “People have more focus around their day without distractions. So we’re seeing a much bigger webinar attendance in terms of the programmes we’re running through the channel. Digital marketing elements also help partners to accelerate growth. It’s about being smart and looking at how you can generate revenue.

“We’re doing a lot more to understand the needs of our customers, making sure that we remain relevant. You need to understand the kind of support tickets that are coming into your business and utilise that information to determine how you can focus sales and improve your products as the dynamics change. We need to retain our customers in these really difficult times. Customer service is critical, and having

tools at your disposal to provide the highest level of customer interaction and engagement is crucial.”

The words ‘home working’ and ‘hybrid working’ are rubber-stamped on all current industry discourse, and in this context the Channel Forecast session did four things. It highlighted data insights, communication and high-touch engagement as necessary to optimised customer experiences in the new world. At the other end of the spectrum it pointed to innovation as being key to unlocking future opportunities.

“With the pandemic, innovation is paramount as we’ve got new demands put on us, whether that’s working from home or reviewing productivity and efficiency,” commented Vaish. “There’s a new challenge for IT managers and resellers in measuring productivity and efficiency while everyone’s working from home. High partner engagement is another piece – educating and talking about the innovations we have in place. It comes back to providing the right collateral and the ability to check different products and technologies – what’s available where, and having the relevant conversations around the challenges that businesses are facing today.

“We’re promoting communication heavily within our organisation. Pick up the phone and have the conversation, don’t drop someone an email or a chat message, that’s too easy. It boils down to the high-touch and communication piece. That will drive the customer experience.” ■



Sachin Vaish

It comes back to basic things – high-touch, high interaction and utilising the marketing teams for what they’re really good at – sending out clear communications and educating the industry and channel partners.

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Commsworld CEO's big e

Commsworld is set to become one of the industry's main players with a voice and influence to match, according to newly appointed CEO Steve Langmead.

Commsworld's Non-Exec Steve Langmead took over the CEO role from Ricky Nicol in January. Nicol continues on the board as Founder and Vice-Chairman. His successor has been a Director of Commsworld since 2018, and former roles include Senior Vice President of Atos in Scotland and Capita's Chief Executive for Scotland. "While Ricky likes football and Hibernian I'm more of a rugby and Boroughmuir man, but our goals are the same – to accelerate our expansion plan across the UK," stated Langmead.

What transformed Commsworld into a national player was the acquisition of Fluency Communications in 2012. The move followed Nicol's decision in 2009 to kick off the build of a UK-wide Next Generation Network. In 2016 City of Edinburgh Council became Commsworld's first large public sector customer, and in 2018 it won a seven year contract with Glasgow City Council – turnover then exceeded £20 million. "That was a good year for Commsworld," stated Langmead. "Our objective is to double in size by continuing to win new large business across the UK."

Commsworld was founded in 1994 by Nicol as a reseller of telephone systems. Now the Edinburgh-headquartered company manages and controls what it claims to be one of the largest privately owned optical core networks



Steve Langmead

While Ricky likes football and Hibernian, I'm more of a rugby and Boroughmuir man, but our goals are the same

in the UK. It employs more than 100 staff and breaking the £20 million barrier represented a 41 per cent revenue increase on the previous year along with a threefold increase in profits.

The most recent annual figures saw profits rise by 111 per cent, enough to secure a ranking in the Sunday Times Profit Fast Track as the 23rd fastest growing private business in the UK in 2020.

Commsworld's growth is mainly fuelled by its hand in four of Scotland's largest public sector ICT contracts with local authorities. In addition to Glasgow, the company has secured big deals with Edinburgh, Renfrewshire and the Scottish Borders. "Ricky was at the helm as Chief Executive for more than two decades and did a tremendous job," added Langmead. "I have big shoes to fill as CEO. My

task is to provide continuity and stability, carry on the growth, make sure our services are ahead of the competition and expand the customer base throughout England and Wales in the public and private sectors.

Network matters

"Our network covers the length and breadth of the United Kingdom, including every local authority area no matter how rural. We link

up to all Internet exchanges and have much to offer on a UK-wide scale. We've also been working in partnership with global IT and business consulting services firm CGI to deliver faster, more reliable network services in Edinburgh, Glasgow and the Scottish Borders. Good connectivity in the public sector is a target market and we envisage that this will continue to be a growth area."

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Expansion plans

A challenge is getting Commsworld's voice heard when up against the bigger operators, but winning big deals, such as the £5.8 million digital contract with Glasgow City Council, has ramped up the volume. Commsworld's ambitions also became loud and clear when PE firm LDC completed an investment in the company in 2018. The deal provided

its act together, unite and remove the digital divide that the Covid-19 has exposed, creating a world where connectivity is inclusive and digital poverty is eradicated. "Access to digital connectivity is fast becoming a key human right," he emphasised. "Commsworld stands ready to help the Scottish and UK Governments achieve this goal. The key to bridging the

With the backing of LDC we have continued to establish Commsworld as an alternative to the larger service providers

an exit for the remaining Non-Executive Directors and private shareholders including Chairman Ian Blackford. The new-look board includes John Trower as Chairman, Charles Quinn as Chief Commercial Officer and Chief Operating Officer Bruce Strang.

Ramping up

"With the backing of LDC we have continued to establish Commsworld as an alternative to the larger service providers, a point underscored by a £15 million contract win with Renfrewshire Council to upgrade its digital connectivity and services across the region," said Langmead. "This deal is set to last for 17 years and in partnership with CityFibre we have been rolling out full fibre connectivity to approximately 180 council buildings including schools, local libraries and community centres, as well as the region's CCTV and traffic control systems."

According to Langmead, it's time for the industry to get

digital divide is to provide something that hasn't been done anywhere else. We have the connectivity and capability to connect a city's entire social housing stock to our fibre network. This would help bridge the digital divide so school age children in our major cities' poorest areas would have equal access to the Internet.

"Furthermore, if schools provide students with laptops or devices, Commsworld would allow these to connect directly to the school network – in the same way as the council network. Good connectivity would provide homes with Wi-Fi and wired Ethernet ports to support device connections including IoT and sensors.

"Such a network would support equality and inclusion in education while also helping to raise attainment. Cities could fund this from capital funds available for social housing improvements. Lives could be transformed and the knock-on benefits could be huge." ■

Just a minute with Steve Langmead...

Role model: I admire anyone from the older generation. We can learn so much from their wisdom and experience.

What's the biggest risk you have taken? Starting up my first business. I hadn't done that before and I knew it was going to be a learning curve.

If you weren't in IT what would you be doing? As a schoolboy I loved architecture and archaeology. Still do, so I'd probably have chosen a career in either one.

Tell us something about yourself we don't know: I am dyslexic and always struggled to spell. It's been a challenge, but I've also used it as a positive. It helps me look at the world in a different way.

Biggest achievement: I have always enjoyed helping talented young business people develop and move on to grow their own businesses. I still get the most pleasure out of doing so today. It's vital that those at the top help continue to nurture the best talent of tomorrow.

Lessons learnt: I make a point of running towards things which other people say cannot be done. I wish that I had this philosophy earlier in life.

Name three ideal dinner guests: I'm a vegetarian, so my ideal guests would be any three people who love good veggie food and have good chat.

Give one example of something you have overcome: Dyslexia. I learned to turn what might be seen as a weakness into a strength.

What do you fear most? Nothing really: I like embracing all challenges, the bigger the better.

How do you relax? Enjoying family and rugby time. My sons play and my wife likes rugby too.

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Barclay boosted by top

Belfast-based Barclay Communications is fast becoming a household name in the comms industry as founder and Managing Director Britt Megahey continues to extend his reach and influence in target regions.

The momentous purchase of Megahey's first mobile phone is etched in memory – the sales pitch, the process, the shop floor atmosphere and overall wow factor – so much so that new possibilities were immediately unleashed. "It was then that the seeds of a communications business plan were planted in my mind, despite having grown up in the world of agriculture," stated Megahey. "Technology was always a fascination to me growing up."

This year is Barclay Communications' 25th since inception. Megahey started out with a network of walk-in phone shops for consumers and at its height operated out of ten shops across Northern Ireland, with rapid success. "But it became apparent that there was a gap in the market, a niche to provide communication packages and services to the business community," he explained. "We knew we could fill that gap so formed Barclay Communications. From the outset our objective was to take the weight off the customer so they could focus on their business. That is still in our DNA and has been instrumental in securing more and more contracts over the years. Some of our first corporate clients are still customers."

Having quickly embedded in Northern Ireland Megahey



Britt Megahey pictured at Cambridge University following Barclay's major contract win

To be the communications provider for an establishment that has spawned some of the greatest minds in our living history is an achievement

made a bold decision to expand the business at an early stage. "We were thriving and could have plodded along," he said. "However, especially in Northern Ireland, there was a real need for excellence in our field so I took that step to invest and grow. We purchased new offices and expanded the

team. It was a gamble, but one that paid off."

Ongoing growth

The company grew rapidly from 10 staff to over 100 and established teams in England and Scotland. "One of the keys to our success has been a reluctance to settle," added Megahey. "We have a growth mindset

in terms of the products and services we offer and the size of the company. I've always believed in investing in the business, and myself and the team are always evolving as a result of that mindset."

Megahey has several companies and between them they turn over circa £30 million. "We have been

successful in the public sector and with leading organisations over recent years, and have seen our base now exceed 100,000 connections across all products," noted Megahey. "Winning a recent £3 million contract with the University of Cambridge to provide 5,000 connections across 37 sites in various countries

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was a major feat. To be the communications provider for an establishment that has spawned some of the greatest minds in our living history is an achievement.”

One of the Barclay Communications Group companies is WorkPal, a mobile workforce management software business. “WorkPal is our own product and something that we built from scratch,” said Megahey. “It’s been transformative for those who use it, making field

expansion. As mobile holds our largest customer base we have set our target at 15 per cent growth while we expect at least a 200 per cent increase in VoIP and WorkPal subscriptions.”

Primed for expansion
Barclay Communications is undergoing large system changes to facilitate expansion but its long held focus on all areas of B2B and its ambition to work in all sectors means the portfolio is already primed for further growth. “We

switch-off and the inability to scale quickly by not being on a hosted platform coupled with huge costs means this area is only at the beginning of its boom. Software within the likes of WorkPal will continually grow – people don’t want to use paper. They need solid and robust platforms that allow them to assign and track jobs, keep detailed reporting of stock or assets, capture remote signature and information while being able to take it all through to invoice seamlessly.”

We expect at least a 200 per cent increase in VoIP and WorkPal subscriptions

worker management the slickest it’s ever been. The early years took a lot of development and our feature map keeps growing. I look at the product now versus where it was in the early days and it is remarkable.”

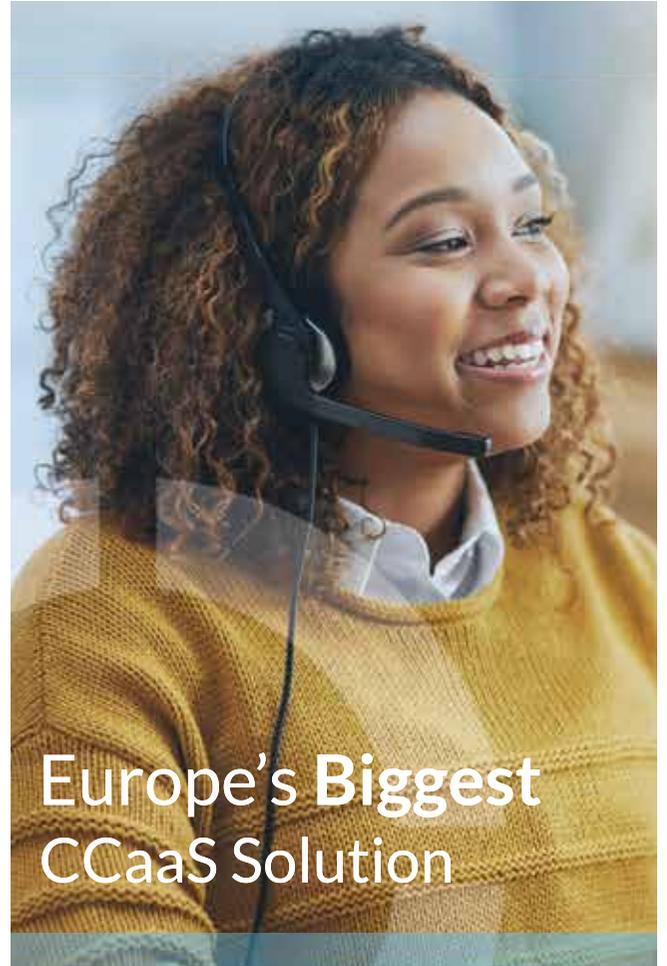
Megahey has invested £1 million in WorkPal and plans to double its workforce to more than 50 heads over the next two years. The roles will be in software development, consultancy and technical support thereby enabling a larger team to reach more clients nationally and globally. “This will help grow the existing client base that spans over 500 businesses here and abroad,” added Megahey. “While mobile is the heartbeat of what we do – and as well as growth within our WorkPal mobile workforce software product – there is significant customer interest in VoIP, landlines, hosted services and IT. These services and demands have hugely impacted our

had a goal that whatever technology, whatever solution or whatever need a customer had – we never wanted to say, ‘sorry we can’t do that’,” added Megahey. “Working with major networks such as O2, Vodafone and BT/EE enables us to align with leading channel partners such as apple, Samsung, Sony, BT, Gamma and LG-iPECS. We are in great company and have the brawn of those partnerships to carry us into our next phase. We are now selling and rolling out our plans in the south of Ireland and we are in the first stages of London planning. Bringing our portfolio to more corners of the UK and Ireland is an immediate goal.”

Mobile has also paved the road towards Megahey’s biggest growth opportunity – software in job management, VoIP and all things cloud-based. “Customers are hugely behind in their technology solutions,” he stated. “With the analogue

There is little doubt that Megahey will achieve all of his ambitions by the time he hangs up his boots, and the same founding principles that underpin the business apply today. “We set out with a clear vision to be different and disruptive,” stated Megahey. “There was a real gap in the market for a customer-led approach and as the industry boomed we kept that at the forefront of everything we did. This meant as competition really stepped up in the last 10 years we had record low churn as customer experiences were instrumental.

“This has been key to keeping the company and its offering vibrant, relevant as well as forward thinking. Right now, I look forward to seeing how people will change with 5G, how technology will evolve and transform the ‘normal’. This again means a shift in what we may sell and the problems we can solve. While pragmatic, especially in times like this – I am a risk taker. This can be perilous and detrimental to success as you can over invest, but it has paid off for me.” ■



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Sanghera sets sights on

A spell as a Non-Exec on the IP Integration (IPI) board exposed an opportunity that former co-owner of DatapointEurope Sat Sanghera could not ignore. He stepped up as CEO in January and wasted no time in setting out his plans to triple the size of the business.

IPI was established in 2001 by Joe Prentis, Dave Glasgow and Jamie Little. It was formed out of an MBO led by the team to break out the voice division from ML Integration which was part of Cable&Wireless. Today the company has 120 people and a turnover of £23 million, supporting 450 clients. Here, Sanghera spells out his strategy and leadership philosophy...

Why did you take the CEO role at IPI?

I began working with IPI in the summer of 2019 in an advisory capacity. What started off as a two-week contract evolved into a year-long engagement and I found myself more and more ingrained in the DNA of IPI and shaping the future direction of the company. I wasn't looking for a new executive role but liked what we had started building, so when owner and CEO Joe Prentis and I spoke about the future strategy we agreed that I would take the reins.

What is your primary growth objective?

We achieved 100 per cent profit growth in financial year 2019-2020 and have ambitious growth plans for the next five years. Our aim is to be three times bigger than we are today with more than half of our revenues derived from our own IP and services. IPI has always focused on delivering enterprise

scale contact centre solutions with a focus on engineering and integrating IPI developed innovation.

How would you describe yourself as a leader?

I am energetic and throw myself wholeheartedly into everything I do. If you are going to do something well you want to come at it with passion and dedication. I have a clear vision for IPI. I also value teamwork. I am not one to sit behind a door, secluded in a corner office. I will be out in the open-plan with the rest of the team, working together to find collective solutions to problems. That's when we're allowed back in the office!

What got you into comms?

I started my career in IT sales at Touchbase where I gained international experience. I then held various leadership and advisory roles before co-founding DatapointEurope where I discovered a passion for innovation and the global marketplace. All of my roles exposed me to global markets which fostered a zest for working internationally. At DatapointEurope, for example, we developed the Intelligent Communications Alliance, a collaboration of like-minded international partners across Europe, LATAM, North America and APAC. At IPI, this commitment to innovation and cooperation will be a key focus as I look to



Sat Sanghera

Our aim is to be three times bigger than we are today with more than half of our revenues derived from our own IP and services

drive the development of our own products.

What does leadership mean to you?

Today, good leadership is creating a better workplace. I want to make a positive impact by improving the working environment, helping people to move on to better roles and encouraging them to believe more in themselves. Inspiring in others a sense of worth and self-belief is central to my role as CEO and that motivates me every day. My leadership

strategy will be shaped by five key guiding principles – people, clients, propositions, fiscal and operational brilliance. Everything we do is based on these principles and they will keep us all focused across the business.

What are your other main priorities?

IPI's job is to get close to our clients and effectively walk in their shoes. We want to remove the complexity for our clients and cut through the noise in the marketplace to develop the best solutions

for their challenges and opportunities. We call these purpose-led solutions. The global events of the last 12 months have increased the pressure on our clients to do more with less, respond faster and with a more empathetic, personalised touch and do this with shrinking budgets. Understanding this helps us drive a client focused agenda and roadmap.

Your key markets and tech partners?

Our target markets are insurance, finance, retail, travel and leisure, utilities, technology, public sector and housing. IPI has developed relationships with Avaya, Genesys, Microsoft, Amazon and Speak. We have applied a lot of analysis to our new vertical market approach, and we are driving innovation with the continued focus on the development of our own applications. Recently we were accepted onto the Crown Commercial Services government framework and within the first 12 months secured a contract for 8,000-plus users for an NHS Trust.

How will your portfolio develop over time?

There are a number of technologies on our radar including automation, bots, workflow technology, managing a remote workforce, AI and machine learning. Underpinning all of this will be analytics that provide the insight needed

triple growth

to determine the success of solutions and services. Video, self-service and a shift to digital channels will also be key trends to focus on. The move towards consumerisation is also shaping our evolution of technology and our service proposition. Clients want and expect consumer grade technologies that are simple and easy to adapt. We are looking at how we can adapt this for the enterprise market by developing agile models based on consumption strategies.

Tell us about IPI's in-house developed products and services

Recent activities have been focused on building out our own cloud and platform services business so that we have the structure in place to deliver our own applications with speed and scale. We have also invested in our Applications Development team so we can continue to develop an integration service capability while driving new applications innovation. Proposition-wise we have invested in and launched the IPI Cloud and Platform services. Last year we completed the migration of our own suite of AI applications to the IPI Cloud. We are totally focused on innovation and have a team of product group owners whose responsibility is to continuously be looking for 'what's next?'

How do you think the contact centre will evolve?

The next generation of contact centre workers will not be in the office, they will be at home (or maybe on the beach!), they may be single parents working flexibly or students working in between their studies. So, a lot of

the work we are doing now is to prepare our clients for these changes by building in the flexibility and agility needed to deal with a new marketplace. Training and upskilling will become ever more important in supporting this, as well as analytics to help provide the insight needed to understand how to make greater efficiencies.

With the advent of bots, we will also see a new role emerging for human contact centre agents. Rather than bots replacing agents, a new market will emerge that will see contact centre workers move into experience management roles. Bots will handle the routine and mundane enquiries, while the human is focused on creating exceptional experiences that enhance the brand and deliver value. As the agent's role evolves and becomes more specialised, we would also expect industry attrition rates to reduce considerably. The impact this will have on the end consumer is significant, further enhancing their experience with a brand in the long run.

How will the role of ICT resellers develop?

We will see an increase in individual resellers entering the market. As the accreditation process becomes more attainable, and as more technology is hosted in the cloud, the whole reseller model is turning on its head. We will see more sales or consulting specialists partnering with SaaS providers and there will be a move towards greater specialisation within the industry. Long gone are the days of resellers doing and selling everything, now clients are starting to demand pockets of specialities. ■

Just a minute with Sat Sanghera...

Role models: My parents. They have amazing values and an unbelievable work ethic. They have their own textiles and fashion business and their work ethic remains exemplary.

What talent do you wish you had? To fly and see the world as quickly as I wanted.

Your greatest strength and what could you work on? I have a real zest for meeting and engaging with people. But I could work on my impatience and impulsiveness as it sometimes takes people off in the wrong direction.

What do you fear the most? Not making a contribution to society.

Biggest career achievement: There are a number of milestones. Selling Datapoint Europe is one, starting at IPI another. It is all a journey.

One example of something you have overcome? I used to take setbacks personally and mull over them for too long.

What possession could you not live without: My acoustic guitar. I can get lost for hours playing it!

Tell us something about yourself we don't know: I have taught meditation for more than 20 years. I have a deep interest in the human mind and how people can live a happier and more fulfilled life.

The biggest risk you have taken? The MBO at Datapoint in 2013 before we changed it to DatapointEurope. We did that in what was a hugely challenging economic environment in continental Europe. Everyone thought I was mad.

What is your biggest opportunity? The continual innovation and development of IP and new service categories, as well as understanding where we can remove pain from our clients.

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Horizon Contact launch

Gamma's capability boosting acquisition of Telsis in November 2019 marked a new phase of product development that led to this month's launch of Horizon Contact. Here, Head of Gamma's UCaaS Practice Andrew Robinson and Channel Managing Director Daryl Pile spotlight how the latest integrated contact centre solutions provide a lifeline to SMEs.

Gamma's launch of an integrated business communication and customer contact solution provides enterprise-level multichannel customer interaction across voice, email and webchat, explained Robinson. "Horizon Contact is the culmination of a development drive following Gamma's acquisition of the software and development capability of Telsis," he said. "Horizon Contact provides a self-service feature set for small to medium-sized businesses. Built within the core Horizon service, our cloud-based contact centre solution provides the channel with an integrated up-sell option for their existing Horizon customers, as well as a differentiated proposition when competing for new business."

According to Gartner, two thirds of organisations are competing primarily on the basis of the customer experience they offer. Therefore the importance of CX cannot be underestimated, but gaining that competitive advantage is easier said than done as customer demands have evolved. "Customers want to use multiple channels to contact a brand, but they also want their experience to be seamless, effortless and quick," said Pile. "They expect brands to know them

and their preferences, and to store their data sensitively and securely. In today's digital economy competition is high and customers want more from businesses. With a world of choices at their fingertips, they can move on from one brand to another in a matter of seconds. One bad experience can lead to the loss of a customer, which means getting it right is critical."

The pandemic has greatly exacerbated these issues, believes Pile, and providing an outstanding customer experience has never been more critical. "To deliver on all these expectations and demands, organisations risk finding themselves overwhelmed," he added. "This is particularly true of SMEs that have often overlooked advanced customer contact solutions, deeming them too complicated or expensive. SMEs have traditionally struggled to integrate an advanced contact centre solution into their strategy leaving them unable to compete in the customer experience battle on equal terms with larger organisations."

"Complex deployments, complicated interfaces and high costs have been the traditional obstacles preventing smaller organisations from investing



Andrew Robinson



Daryl Pile

The channel has driven the SIP and hosted voice market, now is the time and opportunity to do it again with contact centre solutions

in the full potential of contact centre technologies and solutions. Now, it's easy to see how a modern contact centre solution ticks all the boxes for most organisations, and it's time for full contact centre capabilities to move away from the sole domain of the large businesses that could afford such deployments and have the IT resources required to manage them."

Education is key

Pile says that many businesses operate informal contact centres and may not consider supercharging their business by learning about features and functionality which can significantly

improve their customer service and profitability. "Only the channel can educate customers on the importance of having a contact centre solution," he added. "The channel has driven the SIP and hosted voice market, now is the opportunity to do it again with contact centre solutions. We're providing enterprise level features, fully integrated with Horizon, with a wholesale support wrap for our partners at a price small businesses can afford."

Leveraging WebRTC technologies, businesses will only need to ensure their agents have an Internet connection and a browser to log into the platform,

explained Robinson. "This doesn't only reduce costs and required resources, but it also enables agents to easily work from wherever they prefer – whether that is the office, their home or another location," he said. "Moreover, to allow businesses to empower their agents and build a customer experience strategy founded on data, Horizon Contact also offers a built-in CRM and CRM integration with some of the top CRMs in the market, including Salesforce and Microsoft Dynamics. Access to enhanced data and improved reporting allows businesses to make better decisions and assists agents in helping customers more effectively."

It goes without saying that SMEs need a solution that's easy to deploy and manage, which is why Horizon Contact doesn't require capital outlay, additional hardware or software, pointed out Pile. "Designed to work seamlessly with Gamma Horizon phone system and Collaborate, the cloud-based contact centre solution overcomes front and back-office silos, truly unifying communications systems. Horizon Contact provides simple partner support and management, and partners will be supported with training, resources, tools and information to help them maximise the opportunity." ■



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How Exertis drives the di

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. Enter Exertis' HR Director Nick Foster and Chief Digital and Marketing Officer Vishal Chhatralia.

Comms Dealer always seeks to champion shining examples that reveal the real human and business benefits of greater equality, diversity and inclusion in business and beyond. Why? Because industry research and discussion alone will not solve the channel's diversity and inclusion deficit. It needs real-world leadership and a cultural stimulus, as shown by global distributor Exertis which has launched a set of diversity and inclusion initiatives to strengthen the organisation and better relate to customers' needs...



Nick Foster



Vishal Chhatralia

What is your diversity and inclusion strategy?

Nick Foster: Creating a truly inclusive workplace starts with building awareness about the unconscious bias we all have and educating ourselves about how bias impacts our thinking patterns, decision making and culture. This takes time but starts with a plan. We began the journey by raising awareness of the issue through education, including online learning modules, and the creation of D&I action-oriented teams in each of our businesses around the globe.

How do you quantify the positive impact of a more diverse and inclusive workforce?

Vishal Chhatralia: There are many ways to measure the positive impact of a diverse

Creating a truly inclusive workplace starts with building awareness about the unconscious bias we all have

and inclusive strategy. On one level, it is empowering for every individual to know that they are in a meritocratic organisation that rewards talent from whatever background. The best ideas and performance flourish. That's a culture which encourages and celebrates diversity in thought and ideas and is inclusive of all views. This can be quantified by higher engagement scores, measured through weekly, monthly and quarterly employee pulse checks.

The quantified positive impact can be modelled to the financial benefits of a more engaged workforce.

An open and inclusive workforce fosters more diverse ideas which create disruption in the industry, build new value for customers, create innovation for the business and ultimately drive stronger financial performance. Again, the quantifiable positive impact of a diverse team which yields greater

An open and inclusive workforce fosters more diverse ideas which create disruption in the industry

innovation can be seen across industries. Businesses with the most diverse boards are outperforming those with lower levels of diversity at board level on all fronts.

What is your leadership structure in terms of diversity and inclusion?

Nick Foster: We have focused on improving every aspect of D&I in some way rather than creating an artificial target. Each business has its own leadership team and along with local

management everybody has a diversity and inclusion objective. These goals range from committing to improving internal processes such as recruitment to actively engaging with our customers' and vendors' initiatives and making sure we're talking about issues at every opportunity.

Globally we have a diversity and inclusion council which is sponsored by Tim Griffin, Managing Director of DCC Technology, and has

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Diversity agenda

representatives from every business and geography. The only qualification for representing your business is that you have a passion for D&I and are willing to share best practice across the division. Each individual business tends to have a local team made up of a cross section of employees who want to deliver change.

How do you identify D&I success models?

Vishal Chhatralia: Our D&I initiatives are designed to achieve organic change,

partners we serve. Where we have more diversity, we see within our organisation that we have better and more non-linear ideas and innovation driving growth. Organisations, irrespective of industry, perform better with greater diversity.

How do your recruitment policies support a more diverse workforce?

Nick Foster: We recruit all over the world and the majority of our businesses have diverse workforces by virtue of their locations.

Those who are able to see and empathise with their customers' needs will win

not just to hit a target, and that means addressing these issues in a holistic way. This involves many activities, from our high-visibility support for campaigns such as International Women's Day, to our involvement with media campaigns that celebrate success stories. We have a dedicated Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Team (EDIT) which works to ensure that we as a business support, celebrate and promote key events in the calendar, such as Pride, Diwali or International Women's Day.

How far does a company's success hinge on developing a diverse and inclusive workforce?

Vishal Chhatralia: In these times it will be those that are able to see and empathise with their customers' needs who will win. We must continue to build a diverse organisation, which matches the diversity of those customers and

To continue to improve we have looked carefully at our attraction strategies to make sure we are reaching out to a broad spectrum of talent and communities. We've also changed a number of our policies to increase flexibility which in turn attracts a more diverse candidate base. We insist on our recruitment partners and in-house teams presenting truly diverse talented shortlists. This has seen a significant increase in diversity at our leadership and management levels.

How else are you tackling the unconscious bias issue?

Nick Foster: This is an ever-present issue. In 2020 we asked all our employees to engage with an interactive e-learning platform to explore the topic. To support this our businesses held town halls where the issues were highlighted, and we created tool kits for awareness building. We realise this is just a start and each year we plan to raise the bar.

How has Covid-19 impacted your outlook on D&I initiatives?

Vishal Chhatralia:

Throughout the past year Covid-19 has had a number of profound effects, many of which will prove lasting. With more of our people working remotely, transacting digitally and meeting virtually, the business becomes less dependent on location and we see a fundamental shift in working patterns. That creates new recruitment opportunities for those with requirements for different working patterns such as working parents and those supporting dependants. This is a big opportunity for a business that aims to become more inclusive.

How do you keep the diversity and inclusion agenda alive and relevant?

Vishal Chhatralia: A key part of embracing this digital journey involves changing the way we communicate with all of our people wherever they are. With many working from home it's important that we maintain a strong culture that all our people feel a part of, wherever they are. D&I naturally becomes a vital and positive part of this, with D&I messages forming a significant part of awareness days, town halls and all of our people-focused internal comms.

Why must companies put D&I front and centre now?

Nick Foster: It is up to all of us in this industry to adapt to changing times or risk become irrelevant. If you are not providing an inclusive workplace then you are going to miss out on massive talent pools as candidate choose to engage with organisations that reflect and enhance their value set. ■

Six steps to success

Business owners are always thinking about their business in one way or another, whether it's financial performance, the team, product development and yes, an exit point in the future.

We work for our businesses, but do not often take the time to consider how to make the business work for us. With that thought, we are pleased to introduce the Knight Six Step Plan on realising your ambitions for your business.

The below is a synopsis and the full version of the plan is available upon request by emailing enquiries@knightcf.com.

1 Start at the end

What are your aspirations for your business? For many it's an "exit" resulting in a significant and often life-changing payment. Others have this as an ultimate goal but are looking at intermediate steps, including a fund-raise to super-charge growth and/or take some money off the table ahead of a larger deal down the line.

2 What's your timing?

We have found that the most common basis for timing an Exit are: age and particularly retirement for longer-term planning, or a desire to take advantage of the prevailing market and economic climate. Finally, timing may be driven by a business plan, particularly if you have financial investors.

3 What's the value?

The most common way to value your business is by using multiples from comparable transactions ("comps"). There has been a continuous and high level of transaction activity in our market sectors but, more often than not, values are not announced and so accurate comps are hard to come by.

If you want an idea of the value of your business, feel free to contact us without obligation. We will provide you with some firm guidance based on our experience of the sector and the current market conditions.

4 Are you ready?

Doubtless there will be interest in your business, there are currently more buyers in the channel than we can remember since Knight was formed 12 years ago. However, there are a proportion of deals that fall-over and this is

often during the due diligence process, after months of work on the deal.

As part of preparing for a deal, we have a bespoke product called Knight Vendor Assist used by many of our clients ahead of a transaction. It's a dry-run due diligence process that allows you prepare the business and team for the transaction. It will identify any potential issues and addresses them away from the heat of a transaction.

5 On Market or Off-market?

With so many acquirers all competing for the best businesses, you will no doubt have received a post bag of letters from "the perfect buyer".

A key part of what we do is deliver the best possible deal for our clients by generating competition amongst buyers. This is part of a disciplined sales process involving a number of parties that we have qualified as having the means and motivation to complete a deal. If you do receive genuine interest that has piqued your interest, please feel free to contact Knight, we will provide you with an honest assessment of the approach and your options.

Most of our 120 deals have completed as a result of our competitive sales process, but we have completed a number of off-market deals. Even if when the terms of a deal are agreed, there is still a lot of work to achieve a completion.

6 Why use an advisor?

It's a good question, especially as alongside lawyers and accountants, the total fee bill on a transaction adds up to a significant sum. Our advice is that for such a significant event, the experience an adviser brings will pay for itself many times over during the course of a transaction that will last anywhere from 4 to 9 months.

Talk to your peers who have been through a deal and perhaps some buyers, they are very likely to reflect this view (however you should question the motivation of an acquirer saying that an adviser is unnecessary). You should feel free to contact a number of advisers so you can compare and ensure you have the right company and people alongside you to support you.

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2025: Channel must act now

Covid-19 has forced a radical overhaul of how businesses work, but what about the comms channel's big transition? Despite the 2025 cliff edge fast approaching, in many cases nothing seems to shift resellers from a CPE supply model that has barely altered in decades. Here, our panel of industry prime movers state the case for driving the transformation right now.

The year 2025 is a straightforward date in the comms sector's diary but the industry's appointment with its all-IP fate is more complex than meets the eye, requiring immediate planning and strategic action. But for some companies that have existing, functional fixed line services in place there is the temptation to put off an upgrade in the immediate future despite the case for change being stronger than ever, according to Georgina Williams, Director of Voice and Collaboration at BT Wholesale. "Businesses with complex PBX system set-ups might be fearful of upgrading due to the costs involved with swapping out kit and wiring, but it's critical," she said. "Many exchanges will stop receiving support ahead of the switch-off so it's important to educate customers so that they aren't caught short."

To enable wholesale hosted voice solutions to flourish on the new all-IP network support is needed for SMEs and corporate businesses to derive the most value from these virtual solutions. "Channel partners can aid these businesses and ensure they are aware of the best solutions to fit their needs," added Williams.

Within the broad wholesale hosted communications mix there are plenty of areas where this transformation can take place, pointed out Williams. "Voice technology is constantly evolving, recordings on VoIP powered solutions can be automatically analysed and AI solutions can also drive real-time sentiment analysis, allowing businesses to deliver more personalised communications," she said.

"What's more, these solutions can integrate



Georgina Williams

with other technologies in the workplace. Elsewhere, working with a CRM system enables users to click-to-call clients and provides a log of all previous interactions in the same place. Digital voice has the ability to streamline data, modifying sales processes and introducing flexibility and productivity into any business."

No barriers

Those with non-voice services attached to the PSTN (like older alarms, fax, PDQs and telemetry devices) are especially vulnerable because they may not understand the impact of the technology changes on those devices. "These types of devices are now widely available working over the Internet or in some cases an ATA may be suitable," added Williams. "The channel has a huge

role to play in educating organisations to ensure that they can incorporate new solutions with ease and prepare for a future where all-IP is the norm."

The Covid-19 pandemic has given customer education a boost, noted Paul Gibbs, Sales Director at MyPhones. "We have collectively been marketing the snowed-in and DR scenarios for years, but the worst case is now a stark reality," he said. "Businesses had to look outwards to find the right provider if their current supplier could not help. Strategic adoption is now important for end users to ensure their business can flex and change in the long-term."

Customer engagement has also changed, observed Gibbs, and harnessing this

new dynamic will be key to success when transitioning to the cloud. "As a channel our social advertising is now getting much better engagement rates so it's never been more important that our messaging is right," he added. "Sales teams have had to learn to sell in a different way. We have seen a lot of resellers specifically train their sales teams to ensure they are maximising this opportunity."

Seamless integration capabilities will also be key to comms resellers deploying cloud solutions, especially in the run up to 2025. Moreover, rivals in the IT space are set to move in. "It is key for resellers to make sure their portfolios have solutions that provide integration with a range of CRM systems," said Gibbs. "Many in the IT vertical have adopted voice into their portfolio, and with their ability to understand MS Teams it could mean that they are seen as the provider of choice. Many voice providers have been looking for a hosted solution that integrates with Teams and their selection has been led by something that integrates elegantly and easily."

Among the biggest strategic considerations should be a switch to opex and stopping long-term contracts, says



Paul Gibbs

now before it's too late

Ian Rowan, Senior Channel Manager at Wildix. "It still surprises me how many traditional telecoms companies have not fully embraced an opex model and lead their sales based on capex," he said. "Cloud solutions allow channel partners to build up a healthy recurrent revenue that means the company is far more sustainable and has a greater value. The UK market is buoyant at the moment for those that have the right technology in their hosted tool box. It's great to see that even in a general downturn of the economy that vendors and partners in the hosted space have been able to step up to the mark, helping companies to continue to operate wherever they are based."

The pandemic has served as a catalyst for what many could see as a natural progression for communications, which is the wider adoption of cloud services and collaboration tools. "These are no longer things that need explaining, it's what customers are requesting," added Rowan. "But too many partners have had bad experiences with poorly designed, expensive or complex integrations that now create nervousness when approaching clients. Where a partner does not have these capabilities they

can engage with a partner that does. The other issue is cloud providers offering the same functionality as their on-site solution, it's just placed somewhere else. This gives the end user no value from the cloud solution."

Strong adoption

Despite these issues the take-up of hosted telephony is strong and accelerating, observed Dave Reynolds, Managing Director UK for Xelion. "We are well past the early adopter phase," he stated. "The channel is fully aware of hosted, but many resellers have a large installed base of PBX systems which generate lucrative annual maintenance revenue for virtually no overhead. Persuading them to migrate their customer base to hosted with the loss of that maintenance revenue stream is difficult. Of course, over the next four years they will come a point where they will have to move their customers from ISDN systems to VoIP, but it's a tough decision. Remember, Kodak was an early leader in digital photography but film generated so much revenue they left it too late to make the switch."

The shift from on-premise PBX systems to hosted telephony services has been given even more impetus

by the pandemic. "Evidence of this is the withdrawal from the market by PBX manufacturers such as Toshiba and Panasonic," added Reynolds. "But there is so much legacy PBX kit still installed which will never work with SIP trunks once Openreach turns off ISDN in 2025. If resellers have a large installed base of PBX systems they are standing on a burning deck. Those customers are liable to be poached by more agile voice and data suppliers.

"The second challenge is that they must offer true integrated UC solutions for voice and data – the whole pie, not just a slice. Providing customers with an integrated solution linking voice telephony with apps like CRM provides true unified communications. This keeps customers sticky, cutting out entry vectors for competitors."

Unified comms has become far more broad based and seen as a viable alternative to even the smallest PBX, observed Christian Bleakley, CEO of Firstcom Europe. "The UC-enabled transformation of the workplace means employees will no longer be forced to work in the same location, nor be restricted by the tools they have at their disposal," he said. "Businesses and employees have more options now. Our concern is that unified communications may be considered a commodity product in the near-term."

For the channel to do well, more follow up work needs to be done to educate end users about what their unified comms solution is capable of, believes Bleakley. "Our experience is that you



Dave Reynolds

cannot just sell a unified comms product and expect the end user to realise its full potential," he added. "For an end user to really benefit from the capabilities of hosted comms it should not only be the comms manager that sees the potential and uses it, all staff should also be comfortable with using the features of the product that is relevant to their work area. It's not just about education, it's also about solution providers making products that are intuitive to use. New technology solutions that excite customers are infectious."

Realising potential

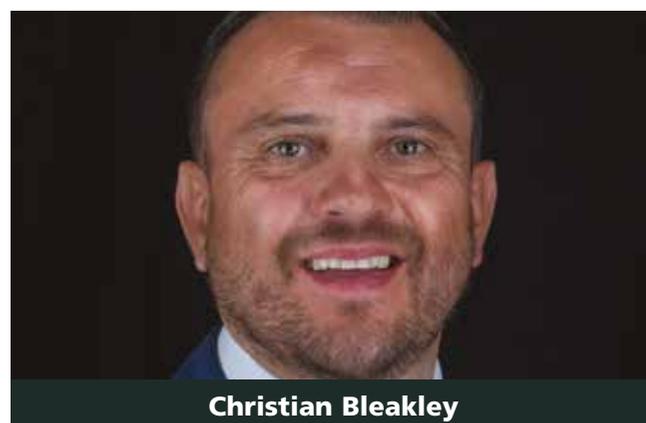
To develop the full potential of a hosted comms solution Bleakley advocates individual customer product plans for the adoption of new unified comms services. "Although resellers generally know their own customer base,

and that Covid has given hosted comms a shot in the arm, there are still a lot of customers using on-premises equipment with ongoing contracts," he stated. "This is a good place to start.

"As we progress further down the unified comms development path, business transformation will be enhanced by increasing integration of services on a number of levels. Simpler integration between hosted comms and a range of CRMs will develop further, providing opportunities for the channel, especially in the SME sector. Our experience at Firstcom Europe in some of the more developed European markets also shows that there has been an acceleration of the transition from fixed phones to softphones and an increasing use of mobile phones integrated with unified comms solutions." ■



Ian Rowan



Christian Bleakley



Taylor lays out ambitious

For Content Guru CEO and co-founder Sean Taylor his market outlook and growth targets carry great conviction and display ambition, optimism and strategic intent as he sets his sights on leading a \$1 billion business post haste, with progress greatly accelerated by Covid-19 lockdowns.

Since Covid-19 broke out in the UK the comms channel's handling of its responsibilities to customers has shone. "The Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated the transition to CCaaS with remote working driving demand," stated Taylor. "We were one of the first in the world into what is now known as the CCaaS marketplace. It took around 10 years before the market was ready. Now it's our growth engine, especially with the acceleration to cloud that Covid-19 has catalysed."

The pandemic has driven many workers out of offices into their homes, and most if not all industry observers and business leaders view a return to 'normal' as nonsensical, with executive level support for flexible and hybrid working strategies strengthening by the day. "The hard work we put in during our first decade meant we had a business and platform to take advantage of the market when it decided that cloud was a good thing," added Taylor. "In the past year Covid-19 has removed any barriers to adopting cloud. Distributed working will be a permanent way of working, particularly in the contact centre industry."

Covid-19 has clearly emboldened the comms



Sean Taylor

We're even more aggressive with our growth plans now the marketplace has accelerated its journey into the cloud

sector's cloud providers but few started their commercial lives on a modest financial foundation. "We started the business with just \$25,000 and turned it into one that has an enterprise value of hundreds of millions," added Taylor. "We're even more aggressive with our growth plans now the marketplace has accelerated its journey into the cloud. Our ambition is to be a \$1 billion-plus turnover business with offices in tens of countries, supporting thousands of enterprises.

We have a formula to achieve that and time will tell how close we get."

Strong pedigree

Taylor co-founded his first company, Redwood Technologies, in 1993 which provided the funding and resource to set up Content Guru in late 2005 based on the conviction that cloud technology would be the way forward for delivering solutions such as contact centres and UC. His capacity to read the mood of the market is reflected in

Content Guru's impressive performance. Revenues have grown strongly with good profitability and high customer retention since the company's inception. Taylor follows a 20:20:10 philosophy, aiming to grow 20 per cent per annum, have a normalised EBITDA of 20 per cent and normalised EBIT of 10 per cent. Financially, Content Guru has seen sustained growth year on year with a 25 per cent increase in revenues from \$44 million in 2018 to \$55 million in 2019.

Content Guru now has offices across the globe, initially with large customers in the Benelux and DACH regions, then reaching out to the Asia-Pac region and a current focus area is rapid expansion in the US. "We have grown at a CAGR of over 27 per cent across the last four years and we are looking to maintain this going forward as more businesses switch from on-premise to CCaaS," affirmed Taylor. "Our revenue ambition will mean more acquisitions in addition to our traditional organic growth."

Covid-19 has not only accelerated Content Guru's current expansion it will also spur what Taylor sees as the firm's biggest opportunity in the coming years – AI. "We continue to invest huge amounts into developing AI technology that will enable contact centre agents to work more easily and efficiently, reducing churn and improving CSAT scores," explained Taylor. "Machine agents that provide sophisticated customer service experiences will continue to grow. Chatbot services have generally been disappointing to date but with some of the innovations we're delivering market expectations will start to be met. The evolution of AI will occur over the coming 10-15 years, so there's plenty to do."



s growth vision

Content Guru's reputation as an AI innovator is building nicely but for now the company is best known in the CX space for processing multiple numbers of enquiries at the same time to provide self-service, already using technologies such as AI and getting value from existing IT assets like CRM systems using integration tools. "We enable organisations to communicate on the customers' preferred basis (voice, web chat, email, social media), and then combine the communication with systems to create an optimised customer

Following Covid-19 a five year runway is now three years and according to Taylor legacy providers in the comms space are 'struggling badly'. "When vendors that were traditionally strict on pricing start offering one year free contracts you know they're in trouble," he stated. "Furthermore, even though the signs have been there for years the majority of the VAR channel still has not pivoted to the recurring business model. They need to shift their efforts to advising, consulting and supporting customers with solutions sold via a CCaaS

Even though the signs have been there for years the majority of the VAR channel still has not pivoted to the recurring business model

experience," added Taylor. "That usually means the customer being able to get the answer they need quickly, whenever they choose, using the communication channel that suits them best."

Automation

Machine agent solutions have proved popular. They leverage AI scalable customer service to support real agent-customer interactions in more natural ways than traditional IVR systems. "We are also driving forward with our storm customer knowledge system (CKS) which improves customer experiences through data insights," added Taylor. "And we're seeing exciting services launched with video, including allowing more immersive interactions with health specialists without a face-to-face appointment."

model that enables a flexible, location independent and secure work environment."

Content Guru's partners range from small, sub-ten person businesses to multi-national organisations such as Vodafone in Europe. "Key to growth is the expansion of our channel programme which offers a range of route-to-market options for partners, including referral and wholesale distribution, in addition to the existing VAR and reseller model," noted Taylor. "The Covid-19 driven shift to digital and cloud-based collaborative communication and security technologies means resellers need to transition their growth strategy, expertise and skills to support the upsurge in demand from their customers for the foreseeable future." ■

Just a minute with Sean Taylor...

Role model: Andrew S. Grove: Employee number three at Intel. Highly intelligent, highly driven and broke everything down into easily understandable strategies.

What talent do you wish you had? To be a concert pianist.

Best piece of advice you have been given? Allow twice as much money and twice as much time, then you'll hopefully have half of what you need.

How did you get into comms? My father was involved in projects like setting up the first UK-wide mobile network. I followed his footsteps and worked for a pioneering computer telephony company after completing a Computer Science degree.

Your greatest strength and what could you work on? I'm very good with people and have worked in long-term highly successful teams. But I get cranky when I'm tired and perhaps less diplomatic than I should be.

Industry bugbear: We're losing innovation as hyper players kill off exciting new entrants through buying or price-undercutting them. The innovation that was there in the '80s and '90s doesn't exist today.

One example of something you have overcome: Multiple people have told me I couldn't achieve things. A teacher told me I couldn't get into the university I chose, which I did. That still annoys me. Teachers should be there to encourage.

Tell us something about yourself we don't know: I am a Deputy Lord Lieutenant for the Royal County of Berkshire.

Lessons learnt: Fast failing rather than dragging things out is something we've improved markedly over recent years.

Fidelity Energy now a powerful fit for Teknov8 Distribution

LONDON-based cloud technology innovator Teknov8 Distribution Group of Companies is the latest ICT business to partner with Fidelity Energy and add energy procurement to its channel portfolio.

The company's new Electrov8 energy division has already landed deals and believes more of its partners will secure energy business going forward as the partnership with Fidelity Energy develops.

"We knew from the outset that Fidelity Energy would be the perfect energy partner for us," said founder and CEO Paul Donnelly.

"From our first conversations we were really impressed with how similar its approach to partners was to ours and we knew that a partnership would add more value to our growing base. We strongly believe our managed services is what attracts our partners to our brands and that trust is the key to being able to offer impartial advice and expertise to our partner base.

"Fidelity Energy share in these values. We have total confidence that this is the right partnership for Electrov8 and our partners."

Donnelly founded Teknov8 in 2018, with the vision to offer tailored security and compliance solutions and support businesses with Back Up Disaster Recovery and Cyber Protection services.

With a suite of services and solutions at its disposal and extensive experience in hosting, cloud and security markets, Teknov8 has established a strong foothold in the marketplace and is the Global Cloud Delivery Partner for global cyber security specialist Acronis.

Tara-Jane Sloane, VP of Sales at Electrov8 reports that launching Electrov8 and working through



Paul Donnelly

the onboarding process with Fidelity was rapid and uncomplicated.

"Fidelity Energy has a fantastic support team. From the point of inception, through to going live our whole on-boarding experience was second to none. Zack Wootton was a key contact for our team from the beginning. He ensured we understood the correct use of the pricing portal and when working through more complex deals, he was always available. Ryan Gilmour has now also become an integral support person in our operation. It's great to know we have extra account support when we need it.

"We have hit the ground running because of the smooth onboarding experience we have experienced with Fidelity, and we're super excited about the future and exceeding our growth plans in 2021."

Fidelity Energy's marketing support has also been vital to the Electrov8 team in its early days, as Tara-Jane explained.

"With our core business being in the technology space, we know the importance of great marketing collateral. One of the reasons we decided to team up with Fidelity is their marketing support.

"Providing data sheets that are industry specific plus energy insights and stats that we can brand as Electrov8 means we take less time to build the material, making more time for us to sell.

"At a first glance, adding energy to an IT business doesn't seem like an easy fit. However, when you review what Teknov8 provide into the IT/Data Security space there is a natural synergy between both products and services and moving into the energy sector is a perfect complement to our portfolio of managed services."



Tara-Jane Sloane

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FTTP upgrade opportunity

FTTP is primed to speed up business transformation, optimise home working solutions and underpin end user strategies, purpose and growth ambitions – all brought forward in the context of an accelerating connectivity upgrade opportunity for partners that cannot be ignored, according to a white paper (called The impact of Covid-19 and levelling up hybrid working) produced by TalkTalk Business.

Covid-19 has redefined how organisations operate and the channel is in a prime position to build on its strengths to become a critical driver for transformation and growth. Businesses are clearly recognising that supporting new ways of working will help them to remain competitive, but the home is an environment where broadband glitches are increasing in frequency. The report notes that for over half of home workers the biggest issue impacting productivity is broadband cutting out or being too slow. This challenge is not lost on 70 per cent of business leaders (across all segments) who can see that staff are not able to be productive at home without fast, reliable broadband.

For the channel, the response of end user organisations to Covid-19 promises much by way of increased investment in digital technologies, including FTTP which will underpin the success of organisations' broader long-term objectives aside from implementing appropriate home working solutions. In the eyes of nearly all channel partners end user organisations' topmost priority is to ensure staff have fast, reliable broadband (91

per cent). Partners also say clients are concerned about maintaining their company culture (74 per cent); training and hiring staff are also key challenges (71 per cent); and many business leaders are worried that working from home may prevent effective collaboration between staff (57 per cent). With companies already developing a more strategic response to Covid-19 and challenges such as those outlined above it is crucial for channel partners to swiftly respond to the opportunity to solve current problems.

It is likely that partners will be pushing against open doors as end users have witnessed first hand the increases in efficiency and productivity of home working and expect improvements to continue, signalling positive attitudes towards investing in the enabling technology, so much so that 50 per cent are likely to downsize their main working location – mostly in the 20 to 49 segment (65 per cent), closely followed by 49 to 500-plus organisations.

While the need to enable home working is well documented, not so obvious is the scope for the channel to solve an organisation's wider challenges and create greater value. As private and



Richard Thompson

A mass shift towards hybrid working and the limitations of home broadband for large numbers of employees is creating a major opportunity for partners

public sector organisations look at the long-term landscape in parallel with their current needs the channel will see an increase in end user investments in digital technologies with over 20 per cent of businesses on average intending to invest in connectivity (mostly organisations with upwards of 20 employees. More

precisely, 25 per cent of the 20-49 employee segment and 35 per cent of 500 employee-plus firms).

Priorities

The report shows that private and public sector organisations see Covid-19 as transformative but in many ways their long-term priorities have remained consistent.

These include the acquisition of new customers, enhancing the customer experience, cost optimisation, IT infrastructure and investment in digital technology – the hot spot being IT infrastructure in the 250 to 499 employee segment which is rated a priority by 70 per cent of respondents.

It is not surprising that partners predict a big rise in home working. They forecast an overall 74 per cent swing to the home environment. These observations are borne out by the near 60 per cent of business leaders who say home workers are more efficient due to no travel time, while 80 per cent trust their staff to work from home. Sixty per cent of 20 to 500-plus employee businesses are likely to scale back their main working location as more people work from home; and high numbers across the board intend to invest further during the next 12 months to help staff work from home.

In the report, around 80 per cent of private and public sector organisations confirmed that in principle they would consider paying for business grade broadband connections direct to employee's homes. But the study indicates

ty beckons

that over half of partners surveyed say it is unlikely that a business would buy a second line and a further 14 per cent are not sure.

A change of partner mindset is needed because the report suggests that a net total of 50 per cent of all businesses are likely to take up a separate additional business grade broadband line into an employee's home specifically for home working. A close examination of the statistics as they relate to larger organisations implies a significant opportunity for the channel: For companies with 10 to 19 employees - 50 per cent would likely take a business grade broadband line; 20 to 49 employees - 58 per cent; 50 to 249 employees - 59 per cent; 250 to 499 employees - 68 per cent; and 500-plus employees - 65 per cent.

Acceleration

For partners to succeed in maximising this opportunity speed of delivery and flexible commercials for hybrid working are urgent priorities according to 60 per cent of those asked. This reflects a pivotal transition phase in which delivery and commercials are topping the agenda, way ahead of business grade customer support, business service level agreements and other support services like project management, account and field service management.

It is significant that most partners (74 per cent) would offer FTTP to clients seeking fast and reliable connectivity. The combination of these three priorities - FTTP, speed of delivery and flexible commercials - is a sure sign of the urgency and acceleration that

characterises a market in a deep phase of transition.

"FTTP is the obvious choice to support the move to hybrid working," stated TalkTalk Business Managing Director for Wholesale Richard Thompson. "The combination of a mass shift towards hybrid working and the limitations of home broadband for large numbers of employees is creating a major opportunity for partners to provide additional services and support to customers.

"In this environment, partners should be well placed to equip customers for the new normal, including sales of additional lines, which they agree would be best fulfilled by an FTTP connection. But our findings suggest it is a bigger opportunity than many think, with only slightly more than half currently promoting business grade lines to their customers and a gap between how enthusiastic customers are about the benefits of this versus what partners think they would value. The importance of adopting full fibre in a timely fashion is crucial. The full fibre revolution has begun and now is the time to get onboard and deliver full fibre to customers. We are at a tipping point of FTTP-led transformation." ■

• **To produce the white paper TalkTalk Business commissioned independent consultancy Quadrangle which consulted with 35 of TalkTalk Business Wholesale partners and interviewed 739 business decision makers and 2,530 employees. To download the white paper please visit <https://response.talktalkbusiness.co.uk/COVID19whitepaper>**

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It's time to switch on cus

Zen Internet research has revealed that almost one in four (24%) businesses are unaware that a range of Wholesale Line Rental (WLR) voice and broadband products supported by the copper-based network will stop being sold completely in two years' time.

That's pretty scary, because when the old network is withdrawn it will affect some essential functions such as card payment machines, security alarms and elevator phone lines.

Even more alarming is that many businesses could soon find themselves bound to communication agreements which are set to become obsolete as the 2023 stop-sell date is reached.

- Over one in 10 (13%) businesses say that the next possible point of contract renewal/termination with their traditional telephone third party supplier is more than three years away.
- Almost one in 10 (8%) say that they have no plans to renew or terminate.
- When it comes to traditional telephony equipment, almost one in six (15%) of businesses say that the next possible point of contract renewal/termination is more than three years away and more than one in ten (11%) say that there is no plan to renew/terminate.

These facts all point to one thing - a massive opportunity for trusted comms providers to upgrade their customers to new cloud based digital products and services, especially with almost half (45%) of other organisations surveyed saying they would consider a cloud-based solution to integrate their communication channels.

As Paul Stobart, CEO at Zen stressed: "Bespoke cloud-based unified solutions can provide scalability, accessibility and efficiency and having a trusted partner is key to supporting this journey."

Zen's research has struck a chord with Openreach, which is planning to ramp up its educational programmes. James Lilley, Director Managed Customer Migrations, Openreach, said: "We relate to the findings from this research. We'll soon be ready to announce a new business specific communications campaign to help provide the level of detail required for businesses to get ready and prepare for the copper stop-sell."

The message to resellers from contributors to this month's Kaleidoscope is clear. Why wait to start getting 'upgrade now' messages over to your client base?



MARK JOHNSON
9 GROUP

"Openreach's full fibre rollout and the government's wider ambitions are widely known, and yet a sense of hesitancy remains. The national stop-sell in September 2023 is imminent and Openreach is motivated to gather pace. As more partners reach the point where they are ready to take a more proactive approach, those who stand still risk being left behind. The impact of copper on other services is potentially under the radar. Partners need clarity around where responsibility for continuity of such services lies, along with support to communicate with their customers. As part of our commitment to partners, we've been supporting proactive customer conversations about the switch-off since 2019. We provide support and advice as well as tried and tested customer communications, which aim to address the challenges and opportunities. A supportive, reassuring approach which aims to inform and educate has been received well, both by our partners and their customers."



GRAHAM WILKINSON
BEYOND

"There are a large number of businesses who have buried their heads in the sand. However, they are starting to wake up to the realisation, as we accelerate at a huge pace into new ways of working, technology and market forces. Weirdly, the pandemic has aided the shift as people have been forced into new ways of working and communicating, that are effective. Legacy ISDNs in offices have not been used and businesses are realising now that they don't need them. This has helped in changing attitudes to moving to complete IP-based infrastructures. From Beyond's perspective we continue to bang the drum of Openreach ultimately turning off legacy platforms. The 'switch-off' message isn't enough on its own, it's more around how you position and bundle new technology. At Beyond we offer solutions like SOGEA bundled with our Simplified Hosted UC voice licences, providing flexible, future-proofed solutions."



JOHN IGOE
CITY FIBRE

"Thanks to ongoing government discussions and media coverage, businesses are increasingly aware of the limitations of copper and the urgent need to upgrade our UK infrastructure. However as connectivity providers it is our, and our partners' responsibility, to be the educators and help businesses forward plan by introducing them to the most effective alternative options available. With regards to Openreach's stop-sell plans, our aim is to keep our partners informed with regular updates on product development and the replacement options available as they evolve. We want British businesses to be able see how they can revolutionise their digital future and so it is vitally important to ensure awareness. By delivering future proof full fibre connectivity we can be confident our infrastructure is fit for purpose for the long term, supporting the UK economy and ensuring businesses get reliable high-speed connectivity to not only offices, but other critical working environments."



Distributor



Dealer



Reseller

Customers to big switch off



VICKI RISHBETH
FOCUS GROUP

"I think the majority of British businesses are largely unaware of the impending changes to the network. It seems that not all CP's are yet engaged with the process, let alone their respective customers. We have a long way to go to communicate, disseminate the available scenarios and assist businesses through the move to an all-IP Future. We are communicating with our customers and channel as much as possible, however we're looking forward to more certainty with some of the solutions the business community uses regularly, such as release of all the new data suite of products, SLA's befitting business customers and new products from our carriers to offer simple dial tone at a competitive price. This will help us to clearly communicate upcoming changes while creating solutions to provide a compelling reason to embark on their upgrade journey."



ROAN PRATT
NETWORK TELECOM

"With the impending changes to the UK telecoms network on the horizon, ensuring our customers are prepared is a priority. At Network Telecom, we are finding a mixed approach from our customers with some eager to accelerate their move to the cloud and others holding off due to a 'wait and see' attitude. However, as BT increases its portfolio with SOGEA and its FTTP footprint this will only help to accelerate change across our customers before copper is turned off. We will continue to advise customers what the impending switch off will mean for their business and the benefits it will offer in order to create a buzz about these impending changes. As part of Enreach, we are working on some exciting enhancements including FMC, EPOS and CCAAS. This will allow us to work with new and existing customers to provide the best possible solutions both for now and the future."



IAIN SINNOTT
VANILLA IP

"I think there are several hindering factors involved in slowing a move away from the copper-based services. From SME customers this includes time poverty, 'every day' pressures that makes the date in 2023 seem too far away to consider. Also, there is the question of up-to-date knowledge; pre-March 2023, many businesses were unaware of the substantial benefits of cloud communications tools. Resellers themselves have played a role in the lack of interest in system evolution. With incomes reliant on old revenue streams and capex finance models, many have neither the working capital nor the will to drive that change early. We enable an easy blend of Capex and Opex options across our portfolio helping partners move toward a full SaaS proposition, creating strong underlying revenues and steady revenue growth. With a newly informed community of buyers, I expect to see the pace of change accelerate as Covid uncertainties subside."



PAUL TAYLOR
VOICEFLEX

"It's fantastic that our great nation will have a 100% IP network by the end of 2025, with a full set of stop-sell exchanges by 2023. There are 28 million WLR lines in place, so it's a once in a lifetime opportunity for the channel to changeout existing circuits, as a high percentage will be PSTN lines used for data connectivity. What an opportunity to re-engage with your customers! ISDN customers don't have an option, they have to change. With change comes an opportunity to sell additional products, be it telephony, security, alarm systems etc. I'm expecting a land grab as after fibre there's nothing else - no new technologies are lurking in the background. If you decide to 'wait and see', it could all be over before you know it. Make hay while the sun shines, with WLR cut off day close, the sun will not be shining for long."



BARRY WARD
WAVENET

"A lack of belief that services will be switched off by 2025 has resulted in a 'wait and see' attitude from many businesses. For some time, this approach has prevailed, but many organisations are now in need of review. FTTP rollout is relatively limited with an ongoing debate between migrating FTTC to SoGEA, then to FTTP, versus waiting for FTTP. There is also margin to be lost in channel on legacy PSTN-based solutions when switching customers to FTTP too early. For channel partners, it is a large undertaking that requires investment, financially and with human resources. Best practice requires project teams to map transitions and move connections to an all-IP service. Clear communication around the benefits of the move is vital, but there is still confusion in the market. It is essential that organisations, like Wavenet, continue to support end-users and channel partners, to help map migrations and ease confusion."



JASON KILVERT
INCOM-CNS

"We have been engaging with our customers on this subject since Openreach's withdrawal plans were announced however, having seen an impressive uptake for ISDN replacement products such as SIP in the early days, the pandemic has led to a change in priorities for businesses and contributed to a slower move to replacement services. The current 'wait and see' attitude appears to extend to our partners in the industry and, while we continue to talk to our customers about what the future looks like, we have been frustrated with the distinct lack of products forthcoming to tick all the boxes in replacing legacy services. As trusted advisor to our customers, with access to a breadth of connectivity providers, we need to source reliable, replacement products to hang our hat on, which includes training our team on new services, pricing, and processes. We need our partners to step up to the plate."

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Driving value in agility

The work from home response to what was a national emergency has in the process gained significant appeal. Here, our panel of experts explore the steps resellers can take to drive agility and value in the hybrid working environment and meet the long-term technology requirements of customers.

Agile solutions are the order of the day but a channel partner's capacity to provide them is wholly dependent on their own agility. For many, this is an area that demands urgent soul searching, relearning, repositioning and a more meaningful knowledge-based engagement with upstream suppliers, according to Rob Downes, Head of Partner Solutions at 9 Group. "One of the telco channel's strengths is customer relationships, and to maintain the strength of those relationships partner education is key," he stated.

"As the industry transitions to all-IP and flexible working the way we are delivering education is changing – the main elements being individual bespoke sessions, understanding unique needs, webinars focused on positioning the sale, understanding the product, provisioning etc. But the real value comes in how partners

are positioning the product out to their customers."

Downes has witnessed an eagerness from partners to make that transition, giving due consideration to new products, revenue structures, forecasting and the growing opportunity in professional services, evidenced by an increasing number of partners seeking support in this area. Another notable trend in this context is the increase in IT providers who are working with 9.

"Historically it was purely a comms channel engagement, now many more of partners have an IT background," added Downes. "They are moving into the market with knowledge of IT services and true UC solutions. Their skill set is especially significant considering the high adoption of Teams and other Office 365 apps and the rise of home working."

He observed that traditional telco partners may lack



Rob Downes

One of the telco channel's strengths is customer relationships, and to maintain the strength of those relationships partner education is key

confidence when it comes to integrated services like Teams, and that some IT providers are not dab hands with voice. "Those who are delivering IT services may not understand the voice element," he noted. "In our channel we're seeing partners acquire and bring in the skill sets to provide the IT aspects alongside telco. This isn't new technology, it's current, and a significant gap is opening between partners who are driving IP and those stuck in the old world. They may be transitioning slowly, but not at the rate that's needed

to become agile enough themselves to deliver flexible solutions to customers."

Education management

Downes also pointed out that some customers still have basic needs. They want to pick the phone up and for it to work. "So information overload on the full scale of hosted can sometimes overwhelm end users," he added. "Simplify it. There is still a population of customers who sit in this camp and just want it to work, even in the context of the shift to remote working."

Support for working from home post-Covid-19 is strengthening across the board and according to CityFibre Sales Manager for Business Partners John Igoe the case for deploying fast and reliable connectivity with sufficient bandwidth could not be stronger. "For both office-based and home workers, the speed and reliability of connections will be vitally important, not only in enabling people to work from anywhere, but also in maximising productivity," he stated.

Not so obvious is the need to review what's already been put in place over the last 12 months, noted Igoe. "Much of the work would have been done as quickly as possible and it will be sensible to look at whether the systems and processes are still fit for purpose and future-proofed," he added. "A review of connectivity is essential as it's critical to business performance. With the roll-out of full fibre services continuing in the UK, many organisations potentially have access to faster and more cost-effective options than at the start of the pandemic."

In assessing the mid- to long-term impact of Covid-19 there needs to be a recognition that managing customers' hybrid set-ups is going to be complex, believes Igoe. "It will take time, skills and resources to do this effectively," he said. "Also, customer needs will change. Many won't have identified and established new working practices. Resellers need to talk to their customers and get them thinking about their future as well as current needs, budgets, how staff and

Continued on page 36

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Continued from page 34

processes are managed, and whether or not their current IT and comms are suited to their requirements. New investment, which probably wasn't previously expected or forecasted, may be required."

It goes without saying that business leaders need to manage their people in different ways and find methods of motivating and supporting colleagues, monitoring and managing performance and providing appropriate flexibility for homeworkers. "The systems they put in place will need to allow for more sensitive and individual interactions as well as team working and collaboration," commented Igoe. "While most teams are working from home it's important to create digital environments where they can socialise and maintain the working friendships you would normally find in an office setting. Businesses need to maintain their culture."

The accelerated transformation of organisations and the shift in emphasis towards more people and community-centric drivers and goals are positive developments, observed Igoe. "Resellers can harness this renewed enthusiasm and openness by becoming the enablers and providers of more agile,



John Igoe

With the roll out of full fibre services continuing, many organisations potentially have access to faster and more cost-effective options than at the start of the pandemic.

scalable, flexible solutions that allow organisations to be more responsive and transparent," he said. "By truly embracing the positive spirit that many organisations are now taking to every aspect of what they do, even with respect to how they measure success, resellers can become true partners and trusted advisors to their customers."

Key trend

According to Voiceflex Sales & Marketing Director Paul Taylor the market is also heavily weighted towards UC&C. "With Microsoft taking a dominant position in the standalone UC&C market all telecommunication

providers have or will be linking into Teams," he commented. "We've seen a marked increase in hosted and Microsoft Teams Direct Routing and don't see this trend slowing. Channel providers can deliver easy to use technology to make peoples' life as easy and engaging as possible. As staff come back from furlough more changes will take place to adapt to a full ICT model. More rounded permanent solutions will be delivered over the next 12 months.

"The work from home experience needs to be on a par with the office. A family of four could have 30 devices connected to the Internet but the experience needs to be the same. We are seeing an increase in domestic installations of data lines with a new PSTN as SoGEA costs are a fraction when it can cost £50 of floor space to put your bin under your desk."

Taylor also observed that other key areas are connectivity and security, and that one market which has been overlooked is mobile comms with the advent of UC&C applications for business and personal use. "Who needs free minutes and free texts now?," he asked.

For resellers to drive value and ensure the long-term sustainability of customers during an ICT deployment there are several more key considerations, including the environment, roles and responsibilities, pointed out Mike Korkidakis, EMEAA Channel Sales Manager at Wavenet Wholesale. "Offices are standing empty with entire workforces operating remotely – this changes the daily roles for many employees," he stated.

"Mental wellbeing and keeping employees connected, motivated and secure is essential, yet may pose a challenge. UC solutions can support organisations with all these elements and enable workforces to be securely and remotely connected.

"When deployed correctly they allow companies to monitor and track activity, ensuring business and employee goals are met. UC solutions also enable employees to foster the flexibility of a remote environment and the work-life balance that is vital to mental wellbeing."

With a big focus on wellness, empowerment and a people-first mentality, Korkidakis believes that these priorities can easily be supported with the right approach, while at the same time ensuring

business security, agility and growth. He also pointed to the valuable role of AI. "It's no secret that the potential of AI is huge, which may concern many," he added. "It's understandable for employees to feel their jobs are at risk, but it is vital to educate and prepare for this coming change. Preparing for these changes will mean a greater focus on data science, analytics and ensuring employees get the opportunity to enhance their skill set in relevant areas."

According to Korkidakis, we have finally moved past the stigma of the cloud and IT departments wanting to own everything on-site, and that with the right scoping and education the ability to deploy functional and secure solutions has become much easier.

"However, organisations need to adapt and continually innovate to stay ahead of the curve," he commented. "Organisations that can truly adapt and develop against the new type of worker have the potential to revolutionise and uncover new profit streams. We are in a whole new world which presents an abundance of opportunities for resellers to drive value and ensure the long-term sustainability of their customers. But some may need to modernise, adapt, focus and innovate." ■



Paul Taylor

We've seen a marked increase in hosted and MS Teams Direct Routing and don't see this trend slowing.



Mike Korkidakis

Mental wellbeing and keeping employees connected, motivated and secure is essential, yet may pose a challenge.

Let's honour all our Champions alfresco

Channel Champions, the new event borne out of the Comms Dealer Sales & Marketing Awards, has been re-located to Regent's Park, London and re-launched as an 'outdoor' extravaganza on July 1st.

This exciting event will recognise the impressive achievements across all functions of channel businesses, namely:

- Sales & Account Management
- Marketing
- Tech Support and Engineering
- HR, People & Culture
- Billing & Finance
- Executive Leadership

In line with Covid-19 restrictions, finalists will now gather at a celebratory summer garden party with the awards ceremony staged in an open marquee followed by networking in the glorious surroundings of London's most elegant Royal park.

Terry O'Brien, CEO of Channel Champions headline sponsor DWS, commented: "We are so pleased the Comms Dealer team is determined to give people in our industry the event they deserve after working so hard during the pandemic and helping millions of key workers to keep Britain working.

"As headline sponsor of both this event and the Comms National Awards later in the year, we are delighted to play our part in paying tribute to the amazing professionals in our fantastic industry. Staging Channel Champions in the open air with a festival atmosphere will make this an event to remember and I can't wait," he added.

Channel Champions Event co-ordinator Nigel Sergent confirmed that entries will be based on work and activities carried out between March 1st, 2020 and March 1st, 2021.

"This has been the most challenging time in the channel's history - when so many teams performed miracles to make sure the UK's crucial organisations could keep working and



millions of staff and management across all sectors could relocate to their homes," he said.

"It's been said many times in the last year, but the ICT sector has been Britain's fourth emergency service during the pandemic, providing vital communications to millions and we aim to reward these heroes at the Channel Champions event in Regent's Park, which promises to be a very different but very exciting day for our industry.

"Given the year we have been through, I am sure all ICT companies will want to take the opportunity to properly acknowledge their teams by entering and with the entry deadline extended to May 5th, there's plenty of time to get submissions completed," added Sergent.

Terry O'Brien urges all channel businesses to get involved in the process to recognise teams which do not always get the credit they deserve.

"Winning, or even being shortlisted for these Awards, will bring a huge uplift in morale as everyone feels valued and they can see how their hard work is paying off. Channel Champions will be a fantastic opportunity to recognise the contribution teams have made not only to their business, but to the wider Channel as well."

To enter go to www.channel-champions.com

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Getting the right mix

The nation's potential for hybrid working has erupted into mainstream strategy and getting the right technology solution is paramount. Here, Timico Chief Digital Officer Paul Farrelly outlines the key considerations that should underpin all remote working solutions.

Covid-19 catalysed the start of a new hybrid working dynamic and according to Farrelly connectivity, productivity and security are now front and centre. In particular, we must not trade security for agility. "Special attention should always be paid to cyber security solutions when adapting to a hybrid workplace," he stated. "Cloud-based solutions such as Microsoft 365 help businesses work smarter. However, with employees working in different locations they open the door for more cyber security breaches. Each IT solution needs to be supported by a layer of security that protects the employee."

Cyber security solutions can take many forms, from firewalls right down to the end user device. "Single sign-on and multi-factor authentication products are also widely used as are managed SIEM offerings which alert IT departments or third party companies if an area is compromised, even if the employee is working away from the office,"

said Farrelly. "A remote VPN provides a securely encrypted connection to the businesses' network, adding an additional layer of security. It allows employees to access the company network from anywhere with a public Internet connection."

It goes without saying that businesses need to be supported by an all-encompassing connectivity solution which allows secure connections to cloud services, while providing employees with access to network resources from anywhere. "Without this, the employee could face considerable downtime," added Farrelly. "What's more, the employee needs to be able to access files and collaborate with other colleagues as if they were in the office. Network platforms allow IT managers to review which software and programmes, such as Outlook or Microsoft Teams, are being utilised by employees the most. They can then optimise bandwidth at the application layer. This means that business critical applications, such as voice, video or even customer facing information,



Paul Farrelly

is not slowed down by other network traffic.

"A fully managed backup solution can also provide peace of mind and enables businesses to create a DR plan should anything happen to the IT infrastructure. DR replicates live data, allowing for failover and faster recovery times. This allows operations to remain running and end users working, should the worse happen."

Employee safety

When Covid-19 restrictions eventually lift and more organisations adopt hybrid working as normal, technology could also be used to improve the safety of employees. For example, monitoring physical access to the office building will aid short and long-term track and trace efforts, in addition to raising the bar on health and safety issues such as fires and security breaches.

"Technology solutions like smart cameras will be key here," added Farrelly. "They provide intuitive video and analytics for monitoring behaviours and hotspots

which can be viewed via a centralised management platform. As the solution is cloud-based, this platform can be accessed easily from any location, ideal for hybrid working."

Leveraging an IT provider or administrator to employ a Cloud Monitoring as a Service (CMaaS) solution can also be beneficial, noted Farrelly. CMaaS is a managed service system whereby the IT provider can proactively monitor on-premise systems, applications, websites and the IT infrastructure all in one place 24/7. He also pointed out that pre-Covid, if there was an IT issue, the IT department was within walking distance of the employee.

"With hybrid working, special consideration has to be given to how employees contact IT support and raise tickets," added Farrelly. "A reliable telephony solution can help IT handle support calls, email, web chat and two-way messaging, while also collecting, storing and analysing all information on one platform."

Cloud platforms also deliver analytics on data usage through dashboards, providing the ability to make effective business decisions. "It is said that data is the new gold," noted Farrelly. "It is the value and intelligence of a business, so it needs the most attention. By managing and running data and application workloads in hybrid cloud environments there is greater visibility of data, allowing companies to prepare for the future by highlighting where marginal gains are."

Covid-19 has also demonstrated how new workplace practices need to be centered around the employee's needs, with technology playing an important role in this. "For those working from home, they may have childcare priorities which means that working hours could spill into the evening. Therefore, the server, network and applications need to be accessible at all times of the day," said Farrelly.

"Some employees may live by themselves so collaboration and virtual conferencing tools are beneficial in lifting morale and connecting colleagues. It can also be a way for employees to share ideas, hold meetings and give presentations so they continue to feel a valued member of the team despite not being in the office.

"No two organisations are the same and there is no one fits-all solution. Resellers need to ask their customers the right questions from the start to gain a better understanding of the workplace so the right technology is put in place from the start."

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Bringing multifaceted hy

Since lockdown, evidence of the success of home working has piled in from across the UK with big implications for ICT providers at the forefront of the workplace revolution. As the dust settles on what has been a crisis, last month's Comms Dealer online Insight Session held in association with 8x8 provided a focused conduit of perspectives that together define the key elements of what we now call strategic long-term hybrid working solutions.

We are seeing a web of connections develop between the key elements that make up the new hybrid working environment, including UCaaS, CCaaS, productivity, AI and analytics, hybrid cultures and mental wellbeing, to name a few. Now, businesses are investing in people-first initiatives, not in physical offices so much. They are spending on dispersed individuals working from home, their quality of life and maintaining company culture, just as much as productivity. And the channel is in the absolute frontline of enabling this shift.

"There's no going back now," stated James White, Director of Marketing, Virgin Media Business. "Our everyday has changed forever and as a result we expect to see organisations

continue to invest in digital transformation. According to our research with the Cebr there is a £232 billion opportunity to grow the UK economy over the next 20 years. It's about moving forward and choosing the right technology to harness the best that's come from this challenging time. In fact, 46 per cent of customers we spoke with plan to continue to work in a flexible way. UCaaS and CCaaS are the tools that make this possible."

Transformational

No one could call the impact of Covid-19 on how most organisations operate as anything but irreversibly transformational. And Covid-19 has exposed how relevant the evolution of comms technology has been, from top to bottom, with the next phase of development being a blend of UCaaS



Graham Kedzlie

and CCaaS. "We see the emergence of contact centre features blending into UCaaS," observed Graham Kedzlie, Regional Vice President, EMEA Channel Sales – Wholesale, 8x8.

"We've seen behavioural changes in the public sector and NHS specifically where there is huge demand now for combined services.

"Many more customers are buying UCaaS and CCaaS at the same time. Rewind 12 months and our combined platform business was circa 18 per cent of overall revenue. In the last quarter

Getting UCaaS solutions out to market is fundamental to our success and we're scaling up enablement."

It is game, set and match to those who long advocated cloud technology. But ICT investment and planning post-Covid-19 needs proper scrutiny. Just as clear is that organisations, including resellers, cannot refuse to change with the times. "Our customers were sent into a spin a year ago and as an industry we reacted with the right types of technologies," said Richard Betts, CRO, Charterhouse.

"It's about delivering information to the fingertips of workers wherever they are. The integration of the 8x8 platform with Microsoft Teams has opened up another huge market opportunity for us. The combination of an



James White



Richard Betts

Hybrid solutions into focus

integrated solution sets us apart and offers the functionality that customers need. We're probably going to end up with people that will come to the office not to work, but to meet."

Strong demand

Betts predicts high demand in new office environments as most of the customer's LANs will not be capable of running all of the required multimedia. "For a lot of companies cyber security set ups may not cope with this new technology," he added. "The hybrid office environment will challenge even existing office situations, regardless of size. There's going to be a requirement for technology upgrades to cope with it all."

Nick Aikman, Channel Sales Manager, 8x8, agrees that a hybrid vision must underpin how businesses communicate after the pandemic. "Functionality doesn't stop at the doorstep of any office," he said. "There's been a big cultural shift as previously there may have been reticence to let people work remotely. This is a real sea change. It's

now about video. We use it on our mobile devices and desktops. That's a big shift."

All the components of an organisation's strategy should be tested against Covid-19, both in the private and public sector. And all those impacted by the pandemic should be under examination from their ICT provider partners. But the way partners approach the market is evolving, observed Rob Merhej, Regional Vice President EMEA, Avant. "Some partners ask us which vertical they should be going after with UCaaS," he explained. "But we shouldn't be targeting specific verticals

The move to home working shows only one thing – that any reversion to 'normal times' would be counterproductive

because everyone is going to be doing this at some point. I firmly believe that at least 90 per cent of all businesses will move their communications into the cloud. Let's not

pigeonhole ourselves. This is a revolution that's going across any business and a lot of the time their challenges are the same."

For resellers, indecision on next steps shows a lack of grasp over their destiny. The success of home working has all but wiped out memories of remote working doubters pre-pandemic. But the current demand has exposed a need for deep reviews in ICT procurement. Stephen Mackarel, Managing Director, Workair, commented: "The real challenge is how to understand the customer, their pain points, and how to use voice as an

integrator into the business ecosystem to streamline the customer journey and remove costly, ineffective internal business processes. That's where the magic is."

Mackarel believes that people sub-30 years of age will not even consider joining an organisation that doesn't enable a hybrid type solution, meaning that the as-a-service model impacts significantly on strategy from the point of view of HR policies, which are no doubt top of mind for one business cited by Mackarel.

"One of the largest insurance companies in Ireland, which is a more traditional type of organisation, has closed its office and will reopen in 12 months time with only 40 per cent capacity," he



Rob Merhej

added. "That capacity will be hot desking and meeting space. That's a huge change for an organisation like that. With people expecting to be able to work from anywhere, you have to have an ecosystem that's cloud-based. From a strategic point of view, bringing your whole ecosystem into the cloud is key."

Out of office

The home environment is now the high profile theatre of work, with the same roles but not subject to the same in-office practices and cultural mood music. "Mental health and wellness are fundamental considerations with remote working, so is culture," added White. "A study by Gartner highlighted that 54 per cent of home

workers say their primary challenge is the feeling of being alone. It's now about how you use technology to create a culture that is hybrid. At the moment, it's virtual. But as we move forward it's going to become much more hybrid. That relies on making the right technology bets and pairing that with a clear understanding of how you're going to use that technology, how it helps your people deliver a great service culture, and how it helps leaders to lead virtually."

A common feature of emergencies is that decisions are taken that would not normally be merited, like the wholesale shift to residential working environments a year ago. Although people are

Continued on page 42



Nick Aikman



Stephen Mackarel

Continued from page 41

working remotely they are far from out of touch, but negotiating the hands-on management of people and the Big Brother jungle of staff monitoring has become a sensitive challenge solved by key components of the technology mix.

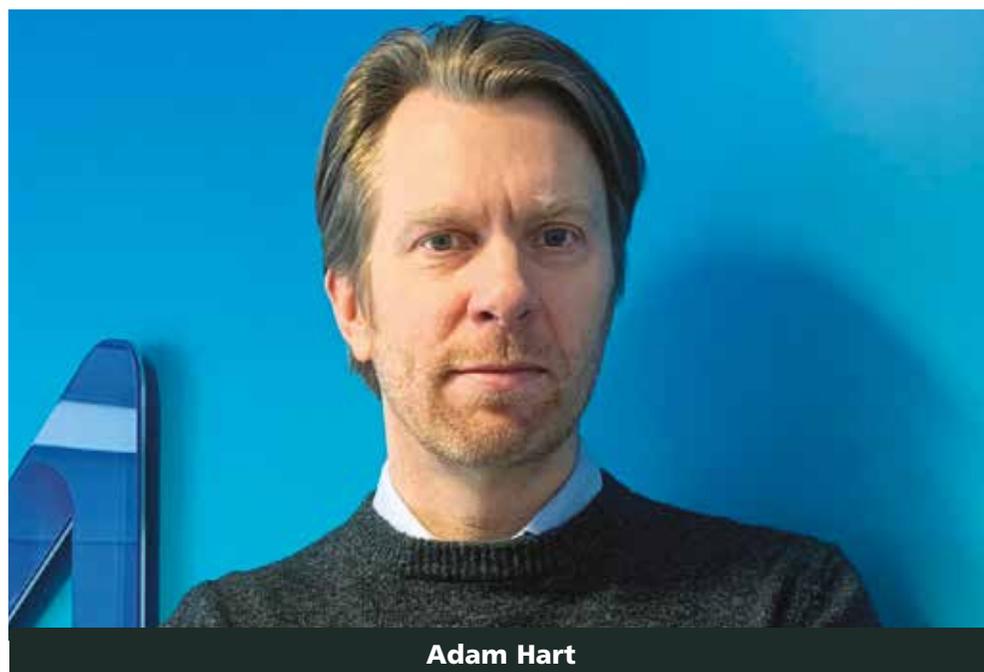
"I've been asking agents how the move affected them," said Joe Murphy, National Channel Director EMEA, 8x8. "The overriding feeling is that it's been a good thing. But an agent dealing with an unhappy customer won't have a supervisor sat next to them as protection. A remote working facility that offers that protection will give people a lot of confidence. It's about outcomes. Now, you can't physically keep an eye on people all day. So you've got to find a way of making technology work for you. That's been driving the adoption."

A pandemic should not legitimise over-the-top staff monitoring at home, and a bias is emerging in favour of technologies that actually make the process more personal and productive, according to Merhej. "How long you've been on a phone call means nothing," he said. "With all the tools we have now there is meaningful data. While you can't get away from the Big Brother aspect, the key thing is

actionable intelligence, not just about time on the phone or other basics. It changes things when users get something actionable, something real, not just a note saying you've spent one hour less on the phone than the guy next to you.

"AI is built within the tools, enabling criticism to become more constructive with informed feedback from management. Communicating feedback via channels like texts or chats makes for a softer approach. People are more receptive to advice, rather than in an office where you're pulled away from a desk and put into a meeting room. It's almost real-time, which makes it less stressful and more effective."

In this context, transparency and trust go hand in hand, noted Tom Cotton, Agile Workspace Technical Director,



Adam Hart

of fish," he stated. "People never like to log in and out for breaks, and there may be more pushback from within their own home. So combining trust with modern techniques of monitoring produces better results and outcomes. Giving contact

trust them to get on with the job, then you need to be able to coach them. Analytics helps achieve that."

UCaaS pivotal

Since the coronavirus pandemic began, the UCaaS piece has also become ever more important, believes Hart. "It's the intersection between mobile connectivity and UC, and when you get that right with a customer it makes them sticky," he said. "But forward development and continuous improvement is absolutely vital. I see vendors that have stopped developing and the product is falling behind. Also key is marketing support, deployment support, and enablement in terms of sales,

training and deployment training for our partners."

There is no longer any debate – the move to home working shows only one thing, that any reversion to 'normal times' would be counterproductive. "This situation has been forced on all businesses," said Betts. "Whether they have a flexible view or not, they've had to approach work in a different way that has made them understand that staff can be trusted to be productive as long as you give them the tools to do the job. They probably deliver better results than when chained to a desk in a nine-to-five environment. You don't need to be in the office to do a good job." ■

Covid-19 has exposed how relevant the evolution of comms technology has been, with the next phase of development being a blend of UCaaS and CCaaS

6 Degrees. "To monitor somebody in their own home is a different kettle

centre agents access to view statistics on themselves is important to allow them to self-manage. This is a better way to measure outcomes. Therefore give them access to the analytics so they can see what you see."

Measuring up

Adam Hart, Head of Cloud & Connectivity, Zest 4, added: "This is a delicate area. Customers don't want a Big Brother situation, but at the same time they want to measure their staff. This comes down to trust and analytical tools. If you're having to monitor staff on a day-to-day basis, then you probably don't trust them. But if you fundamentally



Tom Cotton



Joe Murphy

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TALKING MATTERS

MENTAL HEALTH: It's time to talk

THE Covid-19 crisis has sparked a surge in mental health issues and the ICT industry has been urged to act to prevent further tragedies such as the recent suicide of Fusion Voice and Data Sales Director Nick Duffield.

CAMPAGN

Or: "We are not in any way excluding women and we hope they will also feel they can talk to us. But as wrong as it may be, the ICT industry is largely male-orientated and men who suffer from a 'macho' belief that they should 'man up' and get on with things - no matter how anxious and powerless they may be feeling - may need a more direct approach to addressing their problems."

MIA is urgently training a team of experienced and 'industry aware' associates who will act as a friendly ear for the men and women who need to talk through their pressing issues.

Or: hopes that the whole of the comms sector, especially larger organisations, will get behind MIA to help fund additional associate training. "We cannot lose another person like Nick Duffield when a talk with somebody who has empathy and understanding could make the difference," he stated.

Full report see pages 24-25

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Rob Loakes Senior Channel Manager, White		

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TALKING POINT

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Rahimi takes helm



Malek Rahimi

MALEK Rahimi has been crowned one of the youngest managing directors in the channel having taken the helm at Stratford-upon-Avon based BDR Group at the age of 26. He joined the company 11 years ago, aged 15, as a Technical Support Engineer and has gone on to fulfil many roles including Head of Account Management and, most recently, Group Operations Director.

BDR Group Board Director John Donoghue commented: "Talents such as Malek are rare, hence the speed with which the board is fast tracking and

supporting Malek's development. There is a great deal more to come from him with such a wise young head on his shoulders." Before becoming a director Malek worked in a variety of roles in-house and in the field including technical support, cabling, engineering and fault diagnosis, marketing and lead generation, customer account management and sales.

Also on the move...

ZEST4 has strengthened its channel building muscle with the appointment of Adam Hart as Head of Cloud and Connectivity Sales. His former roles include a four year spell as Senior Channel Manager at 8x8 where he helped build the partner channel and create a wholesale



Adam Hart

division. Hart joins Zest4, an 8x8 wholesale partner, from Connex One where he focused on contact centre solutions and building a channel and partner support mechanism. Zest4 Managing Director Mandy Fazelynia stated: "Adam's experience with major vendors of cloud and contact centre solutions, coupled with a hands-on approach to assisting partners selling new cloud products, are key assets."

ALITER Capital-backed IoT specialist North has pulled in Allvotec COO Paul Comerford as Chief Operating Officer reporting to CEO Glen Williams. Comerford brings more than



Paul Comerford

35 years experience including stints in management positions at Unisys, BT and Damovo. "North has a clear plan to tap into existing and new markets such as IoT and 5G," stated Comerford. "The market opportunity is vast. It's a great time to be joining the business." Williams added: "Paul is a commercial and operationally

focused executive leader with decades of experience delivering change for ICT organisations. This expertise, coupled with his collaborative and flexible management style will add real value to our business."

NETWORK Telecom has swooped on former Gamma Head of Product Sales Roan Pratt who joins the Enreach Group company as Director of Sales. He aims to leverage the 12 years experience he gained at Gamma and propel Network Telecom to the forefront of its key markets.

"As part of Enreach we have the foundations to be one of the market leaders in UCaaS, collaboration and CCaaS in the UK," stated Pratt.

CEO Duncan Ward added: "Roan's arrival is another sign of our intentions to grow Network Telecom further and increase its capabilities, service offering and sales presence across the UK."



Roan Pratt



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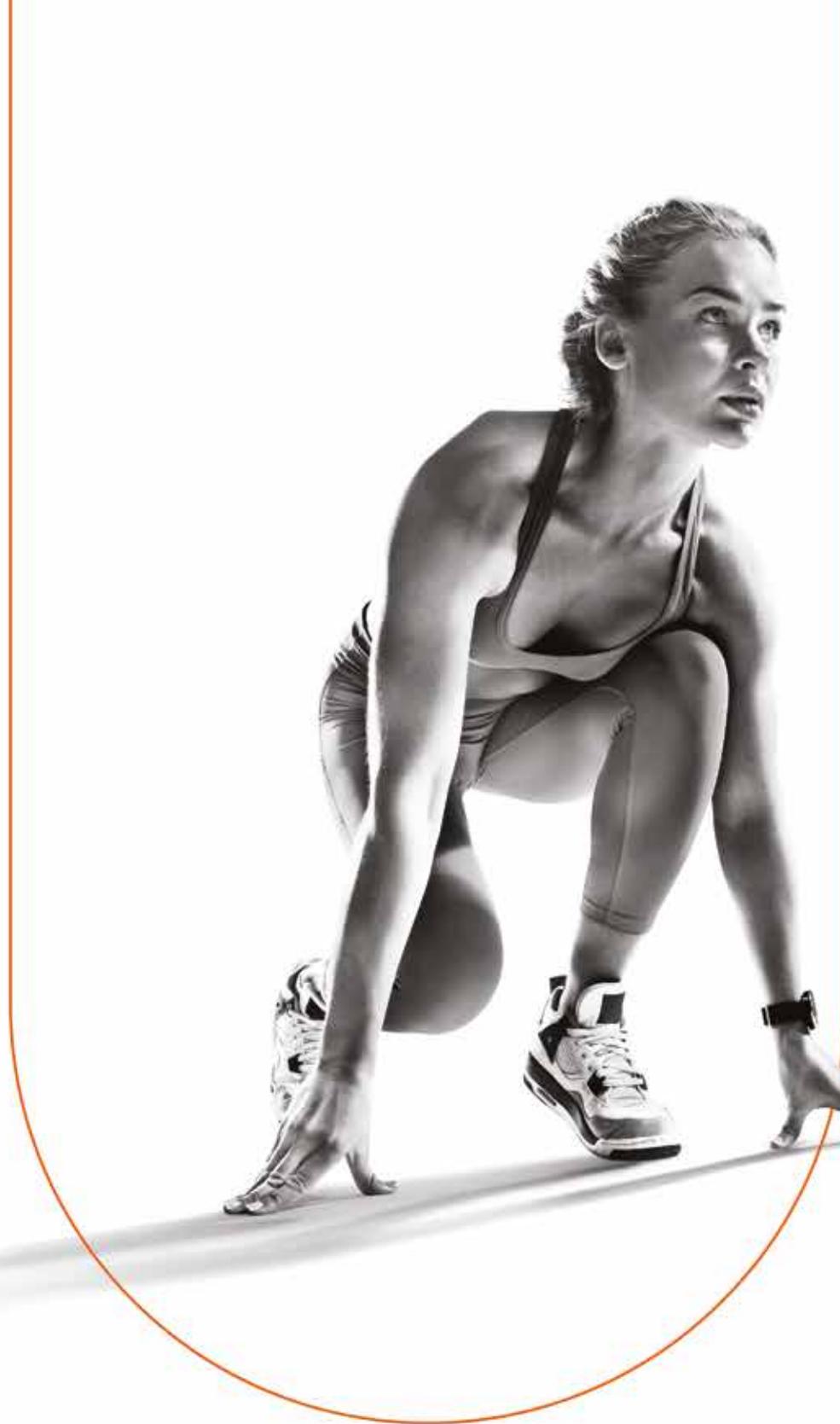
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