VOL 26 ISSUE 3 AUGUST 2021 www.comms-dealer.com

comms dealer

THE HEARTBEAT OF THE UK ICT INDUSTRY

Gamma: Time to ramp up action

THE channel's strong reputation for service delivery is at risk unless Covid-level urgency is maintained ahead of 2025 and neglected UCaaS and CCaaS opportunities among smaller firms are rapidly prioritised.

SPECIAL REPORT

Last month's Margin in Comms as a Service symposium also spotlighted the growing challenges that lie ahead for the channel which include a big uplift in end user education about the implications of 2025.

The clock is also ticking down for organisations not yet kitted out with technology to deliver the experiences now expected by customers. And time is running short for small-er firms facing an all-IP future. They make up a significant pro-portion of the overall market but nevertheless remain in the shadows despite their require-ment for an expansion of omni-channel-type services.

In his keynote address Mark Lomas (pictured), Head of New Business for Channel Sales at Gamma, called the missed micro market a 'forgotten child'.

"There are 6.3 million micro businesses with over eight mil-lion users and the lowest market penetration," he stated. "2025 is a supercharged event, a catalyst for moving forward with the right messages. Act now and make the process simple."

Lomas called on the channel to make the most of what he said will be 'the biggest technology overhaul in years' during the coming 12 to 18 months.

"Change is driven by cus-tomer behaviour," he said. "It's all about the customer experi-ence. That's the driver for every-thing." **Full report on page 18**

CityFibre

Connect homes
as well as businesses

There's never been a better time to enter the consumer market. With many companies implementing agile working solutions, and our open-access Full Fibre Network rapidly scaling to reach eight million premises, opportunity is knocking.

To help you answer, we're making it easy to use our layer 2 wholesale Gigabit FTTH platform. We'll help you get set up, manage the project, and ensure marketing, service and delivery is a smooth experience for you and your new customers.

For an easy way to grow your business contact: consumersales@cityfibre.com

EDITOR'S COMMENT

Stuart Gilroy

THAT the human mind is malleable and makes sense of the world according to time and place and what's in the air is beyond dispute. Also, the thinking muscle is, like customers, somewhat fickle. For example, a top priority now was not so long ago deemed to be the stuff of cloud cuckoo land, with the likes of environmentalist Swampy and Green Peace shouldered into the social loony bin. But today they would most likely feature highly on the candidate list for any job – such is the value that people and organisations now place on matters like ESG.

Gone are the days when staff were 'just staff'. Now, people are empowered by recognition of their true value and a primary concern for all bosses is the welfare of their workers. All this amounts to a higher corporate conscience and a strength of purpose akin to that of the 1990s environmental activists. The goals are the same, and the 'tree huggers' are no longer bonkers but true visionaries in tune with reality.

Unravelling today's corporate focus on people, welfare, CSR, with 'purpose over profit' a big driver, comes back to factors moulding our thinking at this particular time and space in history. End user preferences are reflective of this and therefore creating a new set of market drivers.

Today, customers would prefer to deal with a business that cares for the world and its people. This forms a critical part of the customer and employee experience, and ICT providers that prove to be mindful of these sentiments and buying triggers are surely going to win.

Today, it's hard to fathom why mainstream society ridiculed those who fought for the planet's cause. That anti-environment mindset simply does not make sense to us now, and underlines how critical it is for ICT providers to be able to adapt and maintain complete relevancy despite volte-faces of any kind. Now, resellers will ultimately be judged as much by their good causes as anything else.

Stuart Gilroy, Editor

BAU says Knight CF post-buyout by K3

DEALMAKER Knight Corporate Finance Group and research and development tax consultancy Knight R&D have been acquired by K3 Capital in what Knight CF co-founder Paul Billingham calls a 'best of both worlds' transaction.

The deal structure includes a mix of cash, shares and a five year earn-out for founders Billingham and Adam Zoldan.

The acquired businesses will continue to operate independently with the same teams, brand and location.

Knight CF started life in 2008 and established itself as a provider of advisory services to entrepreneurs and owner managed businesses in the telecoms and technology sector, and has completed over 125 transactions since formation.

In 2016 Knight R&D was established with Rupert Mayo to support companies on R&D tax incentive claims and provides services to businesses from start-ups to large corporates across all industry sectors.

This year saw the launch of Knight Transaction Services, led by Hayley Brightmore, offering flexible, bespoke due diligence services to acquirers, investors and funders.

Adam Zoldan and Paul Billingham

The group has grown to over 30 employees in its Warrington and London offices with turnover in excess of £5m.

Billingham said: "When we were approached by K3 and met with CEO John Rigby and CFO Andy Melbourne it was immediately apparent that we were dealing with like-minded entrepreneurs who shared many of our business values.

"This is a best of both worlds deal that retains Knight CF's existing management team, whose core values will remain steadfast, while allowing us to benefit from the resources of a larger organisation."

Zoldan added: "This is an opportunity to accelerate our growth and reward our team. However, for our clients, it is strictly business as usual."

Rupert Mayo, co-founder of Knight R&D, said: "The opportunity to join a larger and more diverse group with all the associated advantages, yet with the freedom to continue to deliver our services with our particular approach, is exciting."

Rigby added: "There is crossover with the existing K3 business, but we see the Knight brand as highly accretive and it will continue to be led by Adam, Paul and Rupert."

NEWS ROUNDUP

BABBLE has delivered its largest cloud deployment to date by amalgamating 22 systems for travel wholesaler WebBeds and migrating 1,500 members of its team to the new solutions within 24 hours. The digital transformation project has kitted out WebBeds with UCaaS and CCaaS solutions across 22 sites in 15 countries via Microsoft Teams and Five9's cloud contact centre software. Mark Jordan, MD for Contact Centre at Babble, said: "With the travel industry under more strain than ever before, this project has shown how important it is for firms to build in technological resilience that will allow them to reap the rewards as the world reopens."

A COMMUNITY of IT resellers now have access to comms solutions following a link up between Gamma and IT distributor Technology To Go (TTG). Mark Lomas, Head of New Business at Gamma, said: "The lines between traditional telecom and IT resellers are blurring and this partnership will enable all of TTG's IT partners to add IP voice services to their portfolio." TTG MD David Tulip added: "Our partnership with Gamma brings a portfolio of UC, SIP, mobile and connectivity to the MSP community."

Firstcom's growth in Germany

PAN-European cloud technology provider Firstcom Europe's presence in Germany is strengthened by the acquisition of telecom provider Vocatel Business, its third German deal.

Firstcom also has bases in Sweden, Denmark, Poland and the UK where it is based.

Firstcom Europe CEO Christian Bleakley commented: "In revenue terms, Germany is our second largest country operation after the UK.

"Germany has historically not been an early adopter of cloud technologies. However, we have noticed that the landscape is rapidly changing. Collaboration online is here to stay for most companies, particularly those adopting hybrid office-home working environments."

In August 2020 Firstcom Europe raised €29m from Kartesia for a senior loan facility to refinance its existing debt arrangements and drive a buy and build strategy.

Christian Bleakley

Masters hails LAN3 swoop

Danny Masters

SOLIHULL-based Convergence Group's capacity to scale up received a boost following the acquisition of Oxfordshire located network infrastructure business LAN3.

The deal boosts Convergence Group's revenues by over 15% and advances its pay-as-you-go subscription model which MD Danny Masters says reflects the simplicity of paying for a utility, which he also claims is disruptive in the industry.

"Together, we are determined to shake up an industry that is traditionally inflexible in how it delivers for consumers," he commented.

LAN3 MD Martin Jones said: "Joining Convergence Group enables us to deliver for our customers on a greater scale, offering flexibility, technological freedom and autonomy over network connectivity. LAN3 customers will now benefit from being part of a larger group and have access to a deeper pool of resource, products and services."

NEWS ROUNDUP

PINNACLE'S ambition to become a primary provider of Sage business management software received a boost following its acquisition of the Sage business of TMS Scotland, a specialist in Sage 200. The acquisition adds 140 Sage customers to Pinnacle's client portfolio, brings eight Sage specialists and strengthens the company's presence in Scotland. James Spencer, MD of Pinnacle, commented: "We believe our range of expertise and capabilities across Sage Accounting, ERP and CRM software solutions, combined with local delivery, will enhance our ability to unlock geographical growth and expand our services in Scotland."

Quickline in growth deal

BROADBAND provider Quickline Communications has snared a majority share in fellow Yorkshire-based Boundless Networks, an infrastructure provider with an end-to-end fibre and wireless network.

The two businesses plan to build a significant wireless and fibre infrastructure covering much of Yorkshire and Lincolnshire and parts of neighbouring counties.

"Having Boundless on board significantly increases the scale of Quickline's infrastructure and Internet operations, as well as adding expertise in wireless and full fibre network builds," commented Sean Royce, Quickline's CEO.

The deal is reflective of Quickline's strategy to forge ahead with the provision of gigabit-capable broadband, using its hybrid network approach of 5G and full fibre in secluded regions, predominantly in northern England.

The firm plans to invest over £500m to level the playing field for rural premises.

Sean Royce

The combined group (which has over 10,000 customers and close to 100 employees) will see its investment enable more than 500,000 rural premises connect to gigabit-capable broadband, as well as creating hundreds of jobs across the region.

David Hood, Chairman of Boundless, retains a minority stake and remains on the Boundless board. He said: "By merging our assets we have considerably strengthened our ability to grow our reach and enhance our services."

NEWS ROUNDUP

DIGITAL Space (formerly Timico) has hooked up with 8x8, adding the vendor's UC&C and Experience Communications as a Service (XCaaS) products to its portfolio. "XCaaS encompasses cloud contact centre, voice, team chat and meetings capabilities," commented Keith Jackson, Senior Director, EMEA Channel at 8x8. Neil Muller, CEO at Digital Space, commented: "8x8 has global reach for delivering UCaaS and CCaaS solutions, which will integrate with and work alongside our customers' existing digital portfolios."

A HOSTED version of Oak Innovation's compliance recording for Microsoft Teams (called ClarifyGo and which gives users a monthly subscription model option) is being beta-tested ahead of a planned launch later this year. CEO William Emm said: "This offering will give solution providers and their customers greater choice and ease of deployment. This period of testing will ensure that ClarifyGo is readily available to our partners sometime in Q3 this year."

swcomms acquires local rival Taurus to boost regional play

FOCUS Group owned swcomms has acquired local rival Taurus Clearer Communication which has been trading in Exeter and the south west region since 1984, led by MD Jonathan Sawyer who steps down following the deal.

swcomms MD Brian Lodge said: "Taurus and swcomms have been working in the south west for many years and have a healthy respect for each other.

"While there are areas where we compete, there are many sectors where we don't and this will create opportunities for us to complement one another and

Brian Lodge

become a bigger force in the region. Taurus has a reputation for delivering a high quality suite of products, many of which fit with the aspirations of where swcomms wants to be.

"We currently outsource some of these to third parties, so by bringing them in-house we will create an opportunity for both businesses. Likewise, there are solutions that swcomms deliver that will now be available to Taurus customers."

Focus Group joint MD Ralph Gilbert stated: "Our mergers and acquisitions strategy is based on creating a strong regional presence across the UK and backing successful management teams with access to funding, a large portfolio of UC products and the economies of scale we can bring."

To advertise in **comms** dealer
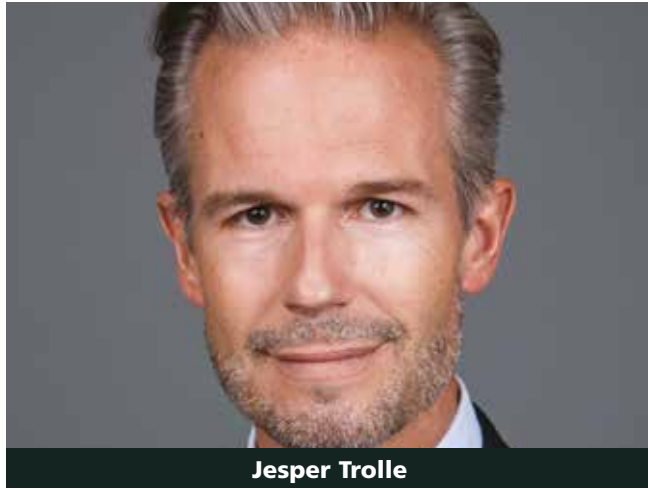contact The Sales Team on 01895 454411

NEWS ROUNDUP

NUVIAS partners now have access to on-demand channel support, marketing and sales tools via a single login following the launch of Nuvias Digital. The tool enables partners to manage subscription services and contracts, track order status and delivery dates in real-time, gain visibility of available inventory and incoming lead times, with learning modules, lead generation campaigns and more.

GAMMA-owned Mission Labs has set out plans to double headcount to over 200 employees and move to a new HQ in Manchester. The workplace transformation specialists added 50 team members during the Covid-19 pandemic and hopes its move to one of Manchester City Council's Grade A workspaces will attract candidates from Greater Manchester's tech talent pool.

A LINK up between Pangea and Daisy Communications gives partners access to the mobile data provider's multi-network SIMs. Julien Parven, Daisy's Director of Partner Business, stated: "There is a multi-network SIM opportunity in every vertical and we are helping channel partners find those deals."

Ignition got by Exclusive

Jesper Trolle

EXCLUSIVE Networks has added extra boing to its springboard for emerging cybersecurity innovators with the acquisition of Ignition Technology, the security VAD with a focus on early-stage security-as-a-service vendors.

Exclusive is also known for developing an operation focused on younger technology companies looking to break out into the global market.

"Ignition will become the brand entity for accelerating the progression of new and disruptive vendors as they emerge from late-stage start-up mode and need to address a market that is global," stated Jesper Trolle, CEO at Exclusive.

"For this purpose, Ignition will be developed globally as the springboard for new vendors and technologies – which have different needs and expectations depending on where they are in their growth journey – while Exclusive Networks remains the pathway for global scale and hyper growth."

Peter Ledger, MD of Ignition, said: "Transitioning through the stages of start-up to scale-out has always been a dilemma for vendors wanting the focus of a local specialist but needing scale. We now have a symbiotic partnership with Exclusive for launching and developing new and emerging vendors internationally."

Platform delivers a CX boost

TELCOSWITCH'S product portfolio has expanded with the addition of 3Sixty, a SaaS platform for optimising the inbound customer experience by centralising communications channels including voice, email and social media alongside customer service, e-commerce, marketing and pipeline management.

The solution enables organisations to communicate with their customers across a variety of channels, such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, live web chat (including chatbots), email, SMS and traditional voice calls.

CEO Russell Lux commented: "Delivering a true omnichannel customer experience that transcends the traditional contact centre is something we've been working towards for the last two years.

"Omnichannel was previously reserved for enterprise businesses but we see a great mid-market opportunity, with many smaller businesses currently underserved and needing to enhance their customer relationships without financial barriers to entry."

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

Northern adds fizz via Soda

Jon Graves

NORTHERN Telecom's fourth acquisition in three years boosts the Leeds-based comms provider's capabilities and precedes a recruitment drive that will add 11 new heads.

The purchase of Otley-based IT support and security business Soda Consulting adds a west Yorkshire customer base predominantly in the legal, retail and financial services sectors.

"There is potential to expand our services beyond that of a traditional telecoms provider," said Northern Telecom MD Jon Graves. "Northern Telecom has a nationwide footprint that hasn't tapped into the IT support and managed services market. In Soda we see a product offering that hasn't yet broken out from west Yorkshire and serviced clients further afield.

"The synergy means that we'll be able to reach our goal of serving 1,000 UK businesses and Government organisations by the end of 2021."

M Group in Waldon buy

Jim Arnold

M GROUP Services' acquisition of wireless telecom infrastructure service provider Waldon Telecom provides a significant boost to its mobile offering and 5G roll out strategy.

Waldon Telecom works across the wider mobile telecommunications market and provides Acquisition, Design and Construction (ADC) services.

The deal is M Group's 13th since December 2016.

"Our strategy is to combine Waldon Telecom's ADC skills with Magdalene's mobile technology services and provide mobile clients with end-to-end solutions," explained M Group Services CEO Jim Arnold.

Waldon Telecom will continue to operate as a standalone brand under the leadership of MD and co-founder Phil James.

He commented: "With Waldon's existing telecom acquisition, design and construction capability, becoming part of M Group allows us to leverage wider services that can be offered by the Group across multiple sectors. This will support our growth aspirations and allow Waldon Telecom to become a large scale and turnkey partner within the mobile telecom marketplace."

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

Node4 nets key MS partner in big deal

NODE4'S IT service capabilities have significantly expanded following the acquisition of Microsoft Dynamics 365 partner TNP, said to be the largest pure play Microsoft partner in the UK.

The acquisition boosts Node4's prospects in the ERP market which it estimates will be worth over £2bn by 2024.

The deal is Node4's largest and the first since Providence Equity Partners became its new principal investor.

TNP sells, implements and supports business solutions based on Dynamics 365 Business Central, Power Apps and Power BI.

TNP will operate as a distinct business unit under the leadership of Paul White, Executive Chairman, with the support of Paul Wellingham, Chief Commercial Officer, and Ian Humphries, founder and Chief Architect, along with TNP's 260 staff.

"TNP has an ambitious organic growth plan in an important segment of the technology industry, and its technical capabilities and credentials in NAV, Business Central and Power Platform complement Node4's portfolio of services,"

Andrew Gilbert

commented Andrew Gilbert, CEO of Node4.

"Together, Node4 and TNP will provide an integrated, end-to-end customer experience, with cloud-led solutions that improve productivity and increase agility for customers."

CARDIFF-based reseller Circle organised two beach clean-ups in July as part of the Million Mile Clean and Plastic Free July campaign. The first litter-pick took place on 11th July at Barry Island Beach where despite not-nice weather conditions employees and their families filled six large bags with litter. The crew then descended on Cardiff Bay Barrage on 25th July. "As well as helping clean up the community the beach cleans provide a way to improve Circle employees' mental and physical health, and an opportunity for the team to get together and meet colleagues who they may not have met due to the pandemic and working from home," said Circle founder Roger Harry. "It's great to see our people dedicate their free time by coming together and taking part in multiple beach cleans, doing their bit to keep our community clean."

CNA

— COMMS NATIONAL AWARDS —

A GOLDEN NIGHT FOR THE STARS OF THE ICT CHANNEL

7TH OCTOBER 2021

WWW.CNAWARDS.COM

NEWS ROUNDUP

THE integration of Union Street Technologies' aBILLity billing system with Sage 50cloud Accounts and Sage 200cloud follows a period of collaboration with partners, pointed out MD Vincent Disneur. "Sage is the most widely used accounting package among our partners so we worked closely with them to develop an integration module from the ground up using Sage's APIs," he said. "The module provides tight integration with Sage software and streamlines the process of managing data between the two systems."

ZOOM is poised to enter the $24bn contact centre market with the acquisition of CCaaS firm Five9 in a deal worth approximately $14.7bn. "The addition of Five9 is a natural fit," said Zoom CEO Eric S. Yuan. "Enterprises communicate with their customers primarily through the contact centre and we believe this acquisition creates a customer engagement platform that will help redefine how companies of all sizes connect with their customers." Rowan Trollope will become a President of Zoom and continue as CEO of Five9.

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

CityFibre-Vodafone beat Ethernet drum

ETHERNET services are proving ever more vital for businesses and are a significant boon to the channel's long-term prospects, according to Kathy Quashie, Head of Indirect Business at Vodafone UK, and Andrew Wilson, Head of Wholesale at CityFibre.

In a collective effort they are charting a way forward for partners to maximise the Ethernet connectivity opportunity among business customers, building on a relationship forged in 2017 that serves the consumer market with FTTH services.

This latest agreement offers businesses faster data speeds in a choice of bandwidth packages including 100Mbps and 1Gbps options. "We're expanding our fixed connectivity portfolio in the channel," said Quashie. "Our new Ethernet services using CityFibre infrastructure offers more choice on a tailored private data network over single or multiple premises.

"People need to stay connected to their colleagues no matter where they are located and full fibre is key for plans to reset, rebound and reimagine growth strategies."

Wilson noted that CityFibre's networks will reach 30%

Kathy Quashie

Andrew Wilson

of the market in the coming years. "Bringing partners like Vodafone onto our platform is crucial in working towards our target to reach eight million homes and businesses by 2025," he commented.

"Fast, reliable connectivity is now more critical than ever for organisations of all types and sizes. As the world of work and the workplace is redefined, we see an ever increasing demand for upload and download bandwidth as everyone realises the significance of high speed connectivity and reliability.

"Full Fibre Ethernet services with increased resilience and scalable bandwidth deliver the future proof solution we've all grown to need."

Wilson also spoke about the Ethernet for business campaign in the context of the UK Government's commitment to delivering gigabit-capable broadband to at least 85% of the UK by 2025.

"Gigabit connectivity is spearheading the country's economic recovery and long-term success," he added.

"Ethernet services will enable businesses to thrive by unlocking their digital potential and offers a fresh opportunity within the channel."

NEWS ROUNDUP

GIGANET has pledged support for adventurer Nick Hollis as he tackles the 721 Challenge – a race against climate change which involves scaling the Seven Summits (the highest peaks of the seven continents), skiing to the North and South Poles and rowing the Atlantic Ocean all in record time. Hollis aims to promote environmental responsibility and raise funds for rainforest conservation. Find out more at www.721challenge.com

A FUNDRAISING campaign kicked off by Vapour CEO Tim Mercer aims to help raise £23,000 by June 2022 in aid of Borne, a premature birth charity. Mercer has pledged to donate up to 24 days of his time over the coming six months offering digital transformation consultancy for businesses. In return he will ask for a £250 donation for a three hour session, or £500 for a seven hour one. "I'm willing to cover any topic from our toolkit, or any solution that we highlight on our website," commented Mercer. "I look forward to discovering what I'll be tasked with and hope to see the coffers filling up. With premature birth an ongoing problem that nobody understands, there seemed no better cause."

DIA AND ETHERNET
CONNECTIVITY
FOR A POST-PANDEMIC WORLD

VODAFONE IS HELPING PARTNERS TO SET A NEW FRONTIER OF ONLINE ACCESS.

People in the UK are now spending more than a quarter of their day online.[1] What's more, internet use doubled across the country in 2020, compared to the previous year. These are the findings of research by Ofcom, and they reveal there has been a record-breaking level of internet usage during lockdown.[2]

Short-term fads, or long-term transformations?
As McKinsey puts it: "The rapid migration to digital technologies driven by the pandemic will continue into the recovery... We are witnessing what will surely be remembered as a historic deployment of remote work and digital access to services across every domain."[3]

These changes aren't fads or trends. We've been moving towards more flexible and remote working for some time now, and businesses have become increasingly dependent on digital technologies to operate – reaching customers wherever they are, and however they want to communicate.

In fact, people now have an emotional investment in good connectivity. A recent global study by anthropologists at UCL found that a "smartphone is no longer just a device we use, but the place we live."[4] When we have easy and ready access to connectivity, it can be of great comfort. Like when we're able to seamlessly collaborate with remote colleagues, shop, plan, bank, learn, or catch up with loved ones. On the flip side, poor connectivity is a major source of stress, denying us access to our online worlds.

So now, here we are: accelerating into a hyper-connectivity used to power our businesses, livelihoods and the way we live our lives. For your customers, it's opened up new opportunities to do things differently. In a post-pandemic world, the ability to provide certainty and high-quality connectivity that can be relied upon is central to any business with ambitious growth plans. Your customers have never been more aware of this fact.

The solution for your customers
Vodafone Business, working collaboratively with partners like you, is empowering your customers to set new standards of connectivity. By doing so, together we're making sure they're confidently connected online.

Through our Dedicated Internet Access (DIA) and Ethernet services, we're providing high-capacity, worry-free internet connections that your customers don't have to share. Many of the benefits of DIA and Ethernet are the same. Namely stability, reliability and security when compared to wireless LANs. Unlike standard shared broadband services, they guarantee private dedicated access 99.9% of the time and consistent speeds. But different businesses need different approaches. DIA offers fully dedicated direct internet access, whereas Ethernet can be a private circuit between Local Area Networks and Wide Area Networks. It means your customer can have secure online communication between locations such as campuses, sites, offices, or labs.

We offer unlimited access, with no usage caps or hidden additional charges, and let your customers choose speeds from 10Mbps up to 10Gbps with superfast upload as well as superfast download speeds. It's perfect for the bandwidth-hungry businesses in your portfolio who can benefit from 100% of the bandwidth they pay for. Customers get on-demand 24/7 access to proactive service monitoring and support to ensure the health of their connectivity. And, we cover the cost of installation when they sign up for a specified period of time.

We are able to do all of this, working alongside our partners to make business better together, as one of the largest networks in the world. Our award-winning network offers performance at competitive prices, as well as flexible connectivity products and services for your customers to bundle into a unique plan for their specific business needs. So, whenever and however they need to be online, they know the solutions you've secured for them can always be relied on.

This proposition is constantly being enhanced, too. We're investing in innovation across all parts of our business, from Internet of Things networks to mobile and fixed connectivity in order to stay two-steps ahead for you and your customers. We're committed to working with you, harnessing our joint knowledge of customer needs and digital solutions. Together, we can drive seamless connectivity services that enhance ways of working and drive growth.

Vodafone Business is bringing you a new frontier in connectivity. By working with us, you can get your customers ready for a post-pandemic world that thrives on the seamless merging of offline and online – driven by Vodafone's digital connectivity.

Our dedicated partner team is ready to talk when you are.

'Vodafone offers burstable bandwidth and traffic prioritisation for flexibility at peak times. It's ideal for businesses that rely on cloud-based applications, VoIP services, or who host their own website.'

Kathy Quashie
Head of Indirect Business at Vodafone UK

DIA AND ETHERNET

Together we can
vodafone
business

1. Ofcom, 2020, https://www.ofcom.org.uk/about-ofcom/latest/media/media-releases/2020/uk-internet-use-surges.
2. BBC, 2020, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-55486157.
3. McKinsey, 2020, https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/mckinsey-digital/our-insights/the-covid-19-recovery-will-be-digital-a-plan-for-the-first-90-days.
4. UCL, 2021. https://www.uclpress.co.uk/products/171335.

NEWS ROUNDUP

ECONOCOM'S acquisition of a majority stake in Trams, one of Apple's top UK B2B resellers, extends its footprint and adds £42m revenue plus 40 heads. Frances Weston, MD of Econocom for UK and USA, said: "This transaction will significantly strengthen our presence in the UK, a strategic development area for the group, and resumes a new cycle of external growth after two years of consolidation."

BEECH Tree-backed MSP Transparity Solutions has snapped up Hants-based Microsoft specialist AMT Evolve as it seeks to bolster its MS capabilities ahead of a drive to double headcount to 300-plus over the next two years. "We are looking at acquisitions to strengthen us in core areas such as Teams, Power Platform and SharePoint," said CEO David Jobbins.

LOGICALIS is merging its UK, Ireland and Channel Islands operations into one unit with overall revenues of £87m and a headcount of 330-plus. The move is reflective of demand for end-to-end lifecycle solutions, says Regional CEO Alex Louth. "This step helps businesses to have a streamlined experience and opens up the expertise within the regions."

Gamma's MS Teams integration

GAMMA'S UCaaS play is bolstered by an enhancement to its Direct Routing proposition that automates the process and a new PBX integration for Teams.

The launch of Horizon for Microsoft Teams, a bolt-on solution to Horizon, brings the cloud PBX within the Microsoft Teams environment.

Chris Wade, Chief Marketing and Product Officer at Gamma, commented: "Our new Direct Routing automation along with Horizon for Microsoft Teams allows us to give partners and customers choice and flexibility when it comes to their UCaaS and voice provider within their Microsoft environment.

"The solution is an alternative to Microsoft Calling Plans and includes features such as business call recording, hunt groups and auto attendant."

Chris Wade

Pulsant ramping up as Antin takes over

ANTIN Infrastructure Partners has acquired Pulsant from Oak Hill Capital and Scottish Equity Partners, which owned the cloud comms provider since 2014.

Pulsant, headquartered in Reading, operates a network of 10 data centres across the UK and has over 1,000 enterprise and public sector customers.

Pulsant CEO Rob Coupland said: "We look forward to delivering on the considerable potential we see over the coming years, driven by our cloud and edge capabilities, our regional presence and our ability to deliver customised solutions.

"The new investment will help us continue to focus on our core portfolio of colocation and hybrid cloud, while also bringing scalable and high capacity coverage to businesses across the whole of the UK through the building of our nationwide edge computing platform."

Simon Söder, Partner at Antin Infrastructure Partners, commented: "The pandemic has reinforced the importance of reliable and flexible infrastructure for connectivity, storage and processing of data given the prevalence of remote working and as more businesses shift to cloud-based solutions.

Rob Coupland

"Through its network of regional data centres, Pulsant is well positioned to support businesses across the UK with flexible data centre and cloud infrastructure solutions."

COUNTY Broadband has raised over £1,000 for Mulbarton Primary School near Norwich as part of the Usborne Books Community Book Pledge which aims to boost reading material and up-to-date resources for schools. Headteacher Bev Theobald said: "It's the perfect present ahead of the summer holidays. High quality reading material is important for children to help promote a love of reading and prompt conversations around issues such as their physical and mental health." County Broadband CEO Lloyd Felton added: "As a community broadband provider, giving something back to our communities and spreading some joy and positivity is one of our most important values."

Turbo boost your customers' bandwidth

Go faster with High Bandwidth

There's an increasing demand for high bandwidth. Many of your customers are already thinking about digital transformation. For using the cloud. For more flexible connections. For big data analysis. And for greater resilience. High bandwidth is the key to delivering this. With greater reliability and speeds up to 10Gb for Ethernet and up to 200Gb for Optical.

We're uniquely placed to support you and help you to respond to changing market conditions. Increased flexibility, extensive reach, faster delivery. All designed to give you more opportunities to grow.

Great Etherflow offers

Now's the best time to sell high bandwidth Ethernet, with some very attractive offers available*. But don't miss out. These will only last for a limited time. To find out more, call your account manager or get in touch.

btwholesale.com/go-faster

BT WHOLESALE

Success strategies for the

We have become used to a gulf separating 'industry talk' from the mood of real world businesses. But from UCaaS and CCaaS to security and connectivity, from productivity to staff wellbeing and CSR, industry and the market are now singing from the same song sheet. And according to this month's panel of experts, this sphere of opportunity, driven in large part by Covid-19 and the new 'everyday', will continue to expand...

Richard Roberts, Vice President Northern Europe, Mitel

Richard Roberts

What do you see as the key success factors today?
To survive and thrive in the new normal, companies need to combine effective employee engagement with a deep understanding of their business, knowing the value chains linking employees and suppliers while optimising the technology to support where this value lies. In all cases, balance is crucial: Success lies in finding the perfect pivot point that supports the productivity gains borne out of flexibility, as well as focusing specifically on where the business generates its value and the quality of its interactions.

The pandemic has accelerated companies' digital transformation efforts.

Businesses are pivoting to adapt their operating models in the new normal, whatever that may be. Just as companies are having to challenge the status quo, so the channel needs to redefine its sales approach to them. Fortunately, as the definition of work continues to evolve, communications services and technology are advancing too.

Has Covid-19 redefined conventional views of productivity at work?
The pandemic has clearly demonstrated that it is misleading to associate time with output, particularly when it comes to knowledge-based work. Gauging performance based solely on hours worked can even

be counter-productive and discourage staff from being efficient with their time. It's time to ditch the nine-to-five and embrace a more results-driven model for this new paradigm of work, where performance is measured against success metrics.

Instead of logging how many hours are spent at a desk each day, bosses should look to set an employee's priorities and goals within an agreed timeframe, empowering them with the most effective communication and collaboration solutions. By doing this, people have the flexibility to work to a schedule that suits their lifestyle and peak productivity period, whether at home or in the office. More importantly, employers can far more easily determine if their staff are being effective and delivering for their business.

What channel opportunities does the new work paradigm present?
The boundaries between personal and professional life are blurring for remote workers everywhere. This new, always-on culture has diverse implications for businesses, both internally and externally. From placing greater emphasis on supporting employees' health and

wellbeing, to meeting the greater expectations of their customers for exceptional experiences, whenever and wherever they are.

This creates a real opportunity for the channel to provide the digital innovation that companies need to meet these challenges. The approach that resellers must consider is that results-driven ways of working are enabled by digital innovation and integrated solutions. In this new hybrid world, tools such as video, voice and chat foster purposeful communication, connect

collaboration tools, with built-in features to help protect data and safeguard cybersecurity, as well as customer interaction and experience capabilities that transform customer journeys into dynamic, omnichannel experiences. We enable businesses to remain flexible and adapt to further change in these uncertain times, fostering resilience that will keep them moving, no matter what happens next.

As disparate workforces become the norm, businesses of all sizes are facing similar challenges in this new

Just as companies are having to challenge the status quo, so the channel needs to redefine its sales approach

teams and drive collaboration across an organisation. All helping to maximise staff performance and ensure deadlines are met, results are produced, customers are satisfied, and strategic goals are achieved.

How is Mitel addressing the evolving market?
Mitel provides integrated work-from-anywhere solutions including cloud-based VoIP calling, conferencing, chat,

'everyday'. But from adversity comes opportunity. Digital solutions can empower employees to be productive and collaborate from anywhere, which offers big benefits to organisations, from opening up new talent pools to reducing overheads and improving the employee experience. They also enable employees to enhance the customer experience they are delivering, in turn driving sales and helping the business to succeed. ∎

e new everyday

Chris Angus, Senior Director, 8x8

Has Covid-19 changed perceptions of work and productivity?
The pandemic has accelerated the shift from measuring staff time at work to using outputs as key performance metrics. Put more simply, quality versus quantity. The most progressive companies need to offer that 'something special' to attract and retain the best talent. The 9am-5pm working day is an outdated measurement and we'll likely see more businesses shift towards output as a measurement, meaning that as long as work is done to a high standard, it's irrelevant where or when it's done.

How will this impact on traditional sales approaches?
The sales approach has changed over the past few months. We've seen a glimpse into the homes of customers, prospects and employees for example, allowing us to even better connect with them on a human level. Of course it's about remaining professional, but more and more the

approach is now personal, empathetic, more human-centric and community driven. It's less about volumes and more about quality by converting the right prospects into leads successfully, by offering true business value.

How should the always-on scenario be managed?
The need to be always-on is a significant challenge for organisations, particularly as technology is now keeping us connected 24 hours a day. It's important to remember that it's OK to step away from your desk, and not always be on. This has to come from the top down and be baked into a workplace's culture. The hybrid world has emphasised the need to convey a sense of culture and vision, and you have to work even harder at it when you're not all in one space.

How has Covid unleashed recruitment power?
In terms of the channel, these changes have completely opened up the employment landscape as a result of remote working.

People working nationally and internationally bring new ideas and local flavours to how we do business. Regional workers will understand the needs in their local area, so they can connect with prospects. Many of our partners are already seeing this as an opportunity to grow and scale, and not simply as the result of a pandemic.

What channel observation strikes you most?
Channel partners have also shifted how they operate, and the 8x8 sales teams are collaborating with partners all around the world in this new way of working. Deals are being turned around quicker than ever over collaboration platforms, and larger deals are being concluded virtually that wouldn't have happened previously. The channel is at the helm of these changes.

Remote working has levelled the playing field for employers and employees. Employees can carry out tasks and meetings that they couldn't before, they can telecommute into new offices, and employers can seek out new talent and opportunities both nationally and internationally. All of this has led to a boom in the channel with partners looking to take on new projects, increase headcount and grow overall performance. To adapt to the new 'everyday', businesses should look at the processes and policies that staff are being asked to work around. Be agile and think beyond what's here right in front of you, and see it as an opportunity to try new things and scale up. ∎

Chris Angus

Danny Masters, MD, Convergence Group

What challenges have you noted in the shift to home working?

Moving to permanent hybrid working does not come without challenges. Recent research found that 22 per cent of remote workers struggle to switch off from work and enjoy their free time. Helping your team draw a line between working hours and personal time is vital to ensure employees don't become overworked or suffer burnout. Plans should be put in place to keep the workforce aligned to the schedule they should be working to.

How have you adapted your approach to the changing market?

The pandemic has clearly had a huge impact on how and where we work, and has for many been a period of reflection, particularly when it comes to thinking about the office and traditional workplaces. It is abundantly clear that for the foreseeable future at least, hybrid working is here to stay and businesses have to adapt to accommodate these changes. In this new environment, it is likely we will see businesses crave greater autonomy over their workplace – and network set ups – so that they can be flexible as their own workforce changes.

This is an important part of the Convergence Group offer, and we recently acquired network specialist LAN3 to scale up our operations and deliver network infrastructure for our customers. It is about delivering for our customers and making sure they have the infrastructure in place that totally supports whatever decision they make about their working environment. The flexibility that we offer our customers is a huge opportunity for us going forward.

We are driven by our ambition to deliver a commercial model that disrupts and forces change through a maturing industry, giving customers control of an essential utility through a pay-as-you-go subscription, which they can update at any time based on business need. We believe that technological freedom and autonomy over network connectivity should be the norm for every business in the UK – no matter where they are working from.

What advice do you give to businesses challenged by the new everyday?

Listen to your team. Communication is key. Regardless of how your business is shaped people want clarity in what is expected of them. The home office set up should be taken as seriously as the shared office set up, the right environment, policies and network security is imperative to your employees' wellbeing and also your business's safety.

We have worked hard to make sure that everyone feels comfortable in whatever environment they choose to spend their working day, while also retaining our collegiate working habits. We apply the same principles of flexibility and customer choice to our own team. We are in constant communication with all our customers about their network requirements and we understand that the pandemic has seen traditional working patterns chop and change dramatically.

What other factors should be a chief consideration right now?

It's also important that businesses realise that the onset of home working has put their data at risk. The single biggest piece of advice I would give is take the time and diligence to ensure that your data security systems can cope with workers accessing your networks via home Wi-Fi, which is fundamentally insecure. ∎

Danny Masters

Russell Horton, CEO, FluidOne

Russell Horton

What do you see as the biggest leadership challenges at this time?

When working remotely it is much harder to identify the soft issues and gauge the informal temperature of how things are landing with staff. You cannot assume that everyone understands the overall company vision and buys into it – you have to bring the people along with you. Ensuring our acquired staff feel part of the wider culture, while embracing the overall vision and ambition of FluidOne, has been another challenge made more difficult due to remote working. A CEO introduction covering the FluidOne vision, mission, strategy, priorities for the year and culture has been key in ensuring all new starters feel part of the team.

Our leadership team makes sure to cascade the top five company objectives across the business to ensure everyone is aligned and understands what role they play in contributing to the overall company goals. Every month, colleagues nominate each other for staff awards that recognise and reinforce living the company values.

Additionally, when acquisitions have separate cultures, it is tricky to ensure each team, company and office is aligned. Engaging with various managers and staff within each of the offices, and/or company, at multiple touchpoints has proven to be an important and effective way to drive alignment. Early inclusion in company events and communication has also allowed us to build strong connections.

Your biggest opportunity? And how are you addressing it?

Covid-19 has accelerated the move to the cloud for applications as well as the need to evolve networks and especially security since users and applications no longer sit inside the traditional perimeter defences of the IT network. This makes the management from end user to application, wherever they are, more complex for in-house teams to manage as it is typically a hybrid environment using multiple vendors and technologies. Being able to provide our clients with these services has proven to be a great opportunity.

What trends are you seeing that interest you most and why?

The adoption of SD-WAN solutions and hybrid networks is a growing trend. While I think the evolution of SASE is more for enterprise today, I believe it will trickle down to the mid-market and will be a key trend over the next two years. Also, the explosion in cyber threats over the past 12 months is not something to be ignored, as demonstrated by rising customer awareness and the growing need to invest in cyber security. ∎

A billing platform that really cuts the mustard

Union Street's billing and provisioning solutions are software with bite. And our appetite for innovation is never sated.

We invest millions each year to continually enhance our products and improve our customer service for one reason; to put your business streets ahead.

Isn't that scrumptious?

unionstreet.co.uk

Sustaining Covid urgency

The comms channel should not now weaken the strength that allowed it to shine and keep Britain working during the pandemic. We need another revolution in ICT adoption and last month's Margin in Comms-as-a-Service event (Forest of Arden Hotel, 8th July) aimed to kick start a fresh phase of sustained urgency to address today's pressing priorities and opportunities.

The channel should not dim its glowing reputation by weakening a proactive stance that has given it such acclaim since the pandemic hit. The next big challenges? Organisations are entitled to education about the 2025 switch off; smaller firms are long overdue technology that previously only enterprises could afford; businesses small and large are eligible for the technical means to ensure brand loyalty and strong customer relationships; and they have the right to technology enabled long-term sustainability. The key message – there is no cover for the channel not to act quickly on these priorities.

We must also consider that the new post-Covid working model will not diminish nor will the often overlooked business potential within micro-firms that have the same requirements as their much larger counterparts. For too long, sub-10 extension companies have been ranked cheap but ignoring this substantial sector is a dangerous game, according to Mark Lomas, Head of New Business – Channel Sales, at Gamma. In his address to conferees he called the micro market a 'forgotten child' and urged delegates to drive greater value in this sector with new products and services.

Margin in Comms-as-a-Service brought opportunities into a sharp focus

It's all about the customer experience and what you can do to deliver that experience. That's the driver behind everything

"There are 6.3 million micro businesses with over eight million users and the lowest market penetration," he stated. "2025 is a supercharged event, a catalyst for moving forward with the right messages to drive the single line replacement market. How we communicate this message to customers is important. Covid detracted from the 2025 switch off. Act now and make the process simple.

"For two years we have been trying to bring collaboration to the market. Now, if you don't provide it you're not entertained. Change is driven by customer behaviour and we will see the biggest technology overhaul in years during the next 12 to 18 months. It's all about the customer experience and what you can do to deliver that experience. That's the driver behind everything."

Cloud future
The pandemic has shown to everyone what we already knew, that the cloud is the future. But markets sometimes need to undergo a trauma to force them to look in the mirror, change and align with disruption. Andy Robinson, Head of the UCaaS Practice at Gamma, commented: "Consumers are buying differently, driven by Covid-19. And the UK Customer Satisfaction index indicates that service levels are poor. There is a need for the expansion of omnichannel-type services – and customers are prepared to pay more. Resellers have a proposition to do things better with enterprise level UCaaS and CCaaS features for micro businesses."

Robinson noted that the micro market has not been the subject of deep and ongoing industry analysis. Yet sub-10 user organisations all have contact points with end users and need brand loyalty. "Many organisations don't realise they are contact centres, but they are numerous and a new hunting ground," stated Robinson. "There is circa one million users with contact centre needs. That's where CCaaS fits in, as a driver of customer experience enhancement. It has never been more important to build relationships with customers and they require omnichannel solutions."

TelcoSwitch CMO Simon Blackwell highlighted the fact that 92 per cent of small businesses already use one or more cloud-based solution, and with circa six million small firms in the UK, employing 13 million people, this segment accounts for 50 per cent of turnover in the private sector. "Customer experience solutions should not be for enterprises only, they should be for any business," he stated. "People want to connect with brands in ways that suit them. Take Facebook, which has 44 million UK users and billions of messages sent via Messenger. And consider WhatsApp and the many other comms channels.

"Now, the customer experience for SMEs means an opportunity to integrate extra channels of communication, delivered via a customer experience platform that brings everything together with

y ahead of 2025

a single pane of glass. It's all about seamless communication and how to bring in applications and integrate data streaming. Complicated and expensive is wrong – this is not just for enterprise with deep pockets – the connection with the customer is far more important than ever."

The pandemic has put a spotlight on what end users really want, which is proximity to a supportive cloud comms provider. But for customers of CPE-only providers a swift move to cloud may have been sorely missed during the pandemic, with a potential impact on customer relationships. "The customer experience is of paramount importance, and it should come straight out of the box," stated Cliff Chandler, Head of Sales, NTA. "I've been gobsmacked by the number of resellers still pushing CPE. It's time to embrace the cloud because end users need a flexible solution. And the industry has to tell customers what is happening in the context of 2025."

On the flip side, Chandler has also observed a recent and growing trend towards the adoption of cloud solutions in his partner base. "There has been a spike in the last two months as more resellers realise they need to adopt hosted solutions quickly," he added. "They recognise the priority to get into the hosted market, and end users understand that they need a more flexible solution. We are also seeing demand for collaboration and analytics solutions."

Those attending Margin in Comms as a Service were urged not to make a rough stab at channel partnerships, nor show deference to price but prioritise network topology and its role in driving improved customer experiences and reliable services. "Think more about the 'what if?' question when formulating a strategy," stated Voiceflex Sales Director Paul Taylor in his address to delegates. "This involves having a good understanding of the topology of a network before buying services, because 'what if' it went down and the customer blames you? Don't look to blame someone else. You decided on your services."

Uptime matters

Taylor brought his argument into the context of maximising uptime for customers and reducing support tickets at the same time, advancing a direct connection to the Internet as the way forward, supported by Voiceflex's own stats having experienced 99.9998 per cent uptime over 11 years.

Address the 'what if?' question first and you will be free from 'if onlys'. That's an approach that resonated with Knight Corporate Finance Director Adam Zoldan's keynote in which he emphasised getting your house in order to create greater company value – starting at the beginning. "If you are considering a transaction think hard about your aspirations, this will help to mould the business to what you want," he said. "Being prepared is key to bringing certainty into a deal, and make sure you understand your buyer or investor."

Other factors that drive profit include the ability to deliver growth, the target market sectors, scale and the size of the business. "The market remains open and active with a range of funding available and competition for the best assets," added Zoldan. "Consolidation between platforms is irresistible."

He explained that the telecom reseller sector registered seven per cent organic growth pre-Covid, and nine per cent at the start of 2021. The current outlook is 10 per cent. These figures are reflective of the channel's key role in keeping the UK working during Covid – with April to June 2021 being the busiest period witnessed by Knight in terms of deals – all of which, as has been the case for some time, emphasised the importance of recurring revenues.

"Covid turned a technology evolution into a revolution," said Zoldan. "The home economy has also accelerated the switch to hosted solutions and SaaS, put a spotlight in the importance of connectivity and security, and underlined the decline of the PBX and servers."

All organisations have their market biases and PE investors are no exception. ICT is viewed as a safe and predictable sector, attracting a flood of investment with funding diverted from other sectors into safe havens. "There are more buyers now than we have experienced in the last 12 years, with 13 new investments in the last quarter, mostly PE, driving up values of five to seven x EBITDA," added Zoldan. "The success of the buy and build model is driving more PE funds into the sector, creating competition and driving up values." ∎

Up and Coming

At Pragma, we love all our partners, and they come in all different shapes, sizes and backgrounds.

We have some partners like BDR, who have been successful in the market a long time and have worked with Ericsson-LG Enterprise since they arrived in the UK market back in 1991. Others like Focus Group onboarded soon after Pragma launched in 2012, and many others have joined more recently. In this article, we wanted to highlight the growth we have seen with partners that established a new business and chose Pragma and Ericsson-LG Enterprise as their primary partners.

Over the year, we've had the opportunity to play a small part in the growth of some outstanding resellers. Our teams work hard to become an extension of a reseller's team and ensure that our resellers can win and grow because of our partnership.

Jon Dunn, Co-Founder & Sales Director at Mint

One of the great things about our channel is the vibrancy and health of new start-up businesses and the speed of growth that these resellers achieve. A great example of this would be Mint Telecom. Mint were founded in 2015 and chose Pragma as one of its founding partners.

Mint was started in 2015 by Jon Dunn and Damon Smith. They have built a successful business and are one of our most successful start-ups within the Pragma channel.

Jon Dunn, Co-Founder and Sales Director at Mint, commented: "We have loved working with Pragma over the last six years. They have been a massive part of our business, directly helping us to win large opportunities, such as Hozelock, which really helped us accelerate our growth."

Mint provides businesses with a full suite of communications, IT and managed print solutions. It enables us to work closely with our customers and deliver a really positive change to their businesses.

Will Morey, Pragma Sales and Marketing Director, commented: "It is a huge honour to be a part of the growth story of Mint and all of our partners. The team take huge pride in the small role we play in their growth and the outstanding success story that Mint is."

When a new partner joins, we work hard to make sure they know how much we value them from the start and always try to treat them as our most important customer. The opportunity to support the growth of a young and fast-growing business is part of the Pragma DNA. As a relatively young organisation ourselves, founded in 2012, we know the struggles, fun and opportunity in managing rapid growth. As a team, we work hard to maintain the mindset of a start-up but complement that with the structure, stability and operational efficiency of a large organisation. It is this blend we see as critical in so many of our reseller partners. Hunger and passion for success and winning in the market aren't only the preserve of young organisations. The Pragma channel is driven by so many outstanding organisations that are growing faster than ever before.

Ed Savory, Pragma Business Development Director, commented: "Along with many other members of the Pragma team, we feel like an extension of a reseller's business, and when they succeed and win - so do we! The team at Mint are a great example of a reseller that we have a genuine partnership with and have a mutual bond. Their values and drive are very similar to that of the Pragma team. When we think about Mint like so many of our resellers, we find ourselves saying, 'if Carlsberg made customers!'"

Damon Smith, Co-Founder and Technical Director at Mint, commented: "Our experience with Pragma from start to finish has been outstanding. The products they sell are great, the training provided has enabled us to sell and install with confidence and the support given when we need it is second to none. Their success and our success are intrinsically linked, and long may that continue."

Gaining a start-up edge

Securing a competitive edge in today's fast evolving and innovative ICT market calls for a disruptive outlook, fresh thinking, ambition, entrepreneurialism, an innovative edge, energy and the agility to move at speed – all of which are key aspects of a start-up mentality. Here, 9 Partner Managing Director Adam Cathcart discusses how a start-up approach and thinking outside the box will enhance your relevancy and give you a strategic advantage.

Adam Cathcart

Any organisation that wants to make a difference will benefit from having a start-up mentality. Start-ups tend to be super-driven, laser focused and nimble. "The pace of work is fast and the team is often headed up by an inspiring leader who is clear on their mission and purpose," said Cathcart. "They are unburdened by legacy and operate with a flat structure and zero bureaucracy. How many business leaders can look into their own organisation and recognise this way of working?"

According to Cathcart, the most important aspects of a good start-up are being crystal clear on the strategic purpose and regularly communicating that vision and ethos with teams. "By having a focused and shared goal you can align your approach as a team and achieve better results more quickly," he said. "Secondly, appreciate the power of culture. A positive company culture can't be achieved through the odd 'beer Friday', perks and staff surveys. Cultivating an authentic culture relies on people, with every individual playing their role.

"By being clear on your purpose, and by giving your teams the freedom to shape a culture which aligns with that purpose, you'll cultivate something powerful. Thirdly, create an environment that values creative problem solving. Inspire your teams to contribute their all and acknowledge and reward their contribution."

The biggest challenges in creating and modelling a start-up culture in an established company are legacy thinking and not embracing fresh ideas, believes Cathcart. "The ICT industry doesn't stand still, nor does user behaviour," he added. "The profile of buyers will constantly evolve as new generations with different characteristics emerge. Brilliant business leaders will embrace this. They will coach and equip their teams to truly understand today's market and maximise the opportunity."

Key aspects of tomorrow's buyers will be mobile, thrift and shrewdness – these traits apply to tomorrow's business leaders too. "It's vital that ICT providers adapt their sales and marketing approach in line with what customers want," said Cathcart. "From your perception of your customers' needs to the solutions you offer, where you choose to present your brand and how you write your messaging, it all needs

Shoehorning a start-up culture into an organisation will backfire

to resonate otherwise buyers will switch off. Successful next gen' brands will be fixated by their consumer and won't be too proud to adapt their approach."

Against this backdrop, a start-up mentality is vital to long-term success, believes Cathcart, with culture the foundation. "Culture is all about people," he stated. "It's an energy that can be felt in every interaction with your team, whether that's with customers or with one another. Those with a start-up mentality thrive off pace, they are purpose driven problem solvers who value diversity, honest communication and freedom. Cookie cutter culture rarely works. A superficial approach will be ineffective or worse still, counterproductive. You simply can't fake it. Shoehorning a start-up culture into an organisation will backfire. It needs to be developed and nurtured by real people.

"The born in the cloud generation aren't weighed down with the legacy of old technology. They present themselves as a holistic supplier of communications solutions, with the customers' needs taking prominence over the product. Without the historical barriers between IT and telephony, fresh players can present their offering in a way that resonates with today's market."

9 Group was first established in 2001 and became part of the Onecom Group this year. It is a large and established organisation, but has recognised the value that resides within the cultivation and maintenance of a start-up mentality. "We are clear on our purpose as an organisation and we communicate openly and clearly with our teams and our partners," explained Cathcart. "We're known for our culture, which is tangible within the organisation and throughout our interactions with partners. There's a real sense of collaboration within our teams, which makes for a fast-paced environment where we're equipped to make real change every day." ∎

Where is contact centre technology going post-Covid?

Contact centres and their role in the market have been redefined by Covid-19. Here, Martin Taylor, Deputy CEO and co-founder, Content Guru, answers key questions on the evolution of customer and staff engagement...

Martin Taylor

How has the pandemic impacted contact centres?

The last 18 months have presented the channel with an unprecedented opportunity to help organisations accelerate digital transformation, and to completely redefine the way they tackle changing customer expectations. In many industries, these changes have precipitated a monumental shift in how businesses will have to operate moving forwards. Take the contact centre – one of the many areas thrown into the spotlight during the pandemic for the crucial role it plays on the front line of business. The home working revolution has seen contact centres transform themselves from the closely monitored and controlled factories of the past, to a modern and distributed workforce eagerly embracing the benefits of work-life balance, flexible scheduling, and previously unimaginable levels of trust and empowerment.

Has Covid-19 elevated the role of agents?

The pandemic highlighted something that had already started to become clear to many organisations over the last few years – that contact centre agents are a business' key brand ambassadors. Keeping them trained, supported, monitored, motivated and organised – wherever they happen to be – is vital for long-term business success. Agents must be viewed as the value creation superheroes that businesses need them to be.

What model should contact centres adopt now?

A recent survey indicates that 86 per cent of UK workers want enhanced freedom over how, when and where they work. Effective distributed working models will be vital for the contact centre industry as it moves into long-term distributed working. This presents a compelling opportunity for the channel to provide modern, capable tools that will help customers deliver a next generation contact centre environment. The immediate changes are clear – what customers will need is reliable, expert partners that can help them navigate the evolution of the contact centre in the coming months and years.

Contact centre leaders are eager to reap the benefits of a more flexible workforce that can work virtually, anywhere, and at any time. For them, hybrid home working or fully virtualised workforce models not only boost their credentials as an employer of choice, but also allows these vanguard employers to expand their recruitment pool and tap into new cohorts of skilled workers. Delivering this means providing the ability to efficiently manage all types of workers, regardless of location, while aligning agents to tasks and performance goals.

What does a new world CCaaS solution look like?

In the past, contact centres typically took a bolt on, best-of-breed approach to building a complete workforce optimisation (WFO) framework. While deep integration still works, the new paradigm of work requires a full stack WFO solution within a single, vertically integrated CCaaS solution. Those partners that can deliver expertise to their customers in this area will be best placed to provide the vital support organisations will need to adapt to the modern CX battleground. ∎

Fidelity Energy launches carbon footprint management platform

Newbury based energy broker Fidelity Energy have been championing a more sustainable future with their green energy initiatives, solutions and renewable rates. Back in 2019 they began offering bespoke Electric Vehicle (EV) charging points for businesses and have since started to roll out an all-electric fleet for their senior management team and Business Development Managers.

They now are looking further at how to help businesses to take positive steps to reduce their carbon footprint on the energy expenditure they can not avoid, which brings us to their new product, IPSUM, a carbon footprint measurement and management platform.

Managing Director, John Haw explains, "As a business we have always been passionate about providing efficient and intelligent solutions to businesses, but also guiding and enabling organisations to work towards the goal of a net zero carbon footprint. This new software platform does just that.

IPSUM enables organisations to monitor all their energy use points through a single view, giving 360° visibility across their carbon efficiency; pinpointing anomalies and action areas when and where they arise. Soon it will be mandatory for all businesses to report on their carbon expenditure and IPSUM removes the hard work by tracking and automatically reporting, in real-time, the carbon output across all physical assets and premises."

The team at Fidelity Energy know that one of the confusing aspects of becoming environmentally aware and responsible as a business is balancing where you believe you can make a difference, with where you may be expected to focus your efforts. John goes on to explain, "We look at carbon compliance not as a burden, but as a route to greater efficiencies, and a leverage for saving money. Our experience of working with compliance frameworks drives our understanding of how to assimilate them within the business to meet governmental, societal, and behavioural demands, saving money along the way.

IPSUM, puts you in control of the problem and the many multiples of localised problems that it feeds on. In essence, it is a simple solution. It is based on the basic principle that you can manage what you can see. We enable you to see the problem; in real-time, through a dashboard view accessible from any connected device. Then we help you to zap it.

We are excited to offer this new product not only to our partners, but to their customers as well. It is such a clever piece of kit and is simple to install, it took the team a few hours to get our Newbury office up and running. It is the job of every business to make small changes and demonstrate environmental responsibility, especially if we are to reach net zero carbon by 2050!"

John Haw, Director, Fidelity Energy

A platform for change

Here, James Hughes, Group Head of Solutions at Sabio, points to the key factors that should be considered when evaluating right-fit cloud contact centre solutions and the transformation programmes they accelerate.

James Hughes

C loud-based contact centre platforms are changing the Digital Customer Experience (CX) landscape irreversibly. The change, accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic and the pivot to home working, has been turbocharged by the rise of cloud computing behemoths Amazon AWS, Microsoft Azure and Google Cloud Platform (GCP). The three largest players have dramatically lowered the barriers to almost limitless compute, capable of securely and robustly handling even the most complex of workloads, including the core of all large contact centres – voice.

The democratisation of compute power has paved the way for more vendors to enter the CCaaS space with offerings designed natively for the cloud and adapted for the 'devops' style processes and skills, which include Twilio Flex, Genesys Cloud and Amazon's own Connect solution with other leading players working to catch up. The as-a-service nature of the platforms allows their consumers to significantly reduce run costs, both in infrastructure and

personnel previously required to keep on-premise platforms operational and up to date. Successful organisations are reinvesting the cost savings, time and focus into building new CX capabilities for their customers and distinguishing themselves in the marketplace.

Planning
While standout companies are maximising the investment in their move to cloud, many others are finding themselves out of pocket and underwhelmed by the results that were so widely touted at the outset. Without the correct planning, expertise or trusted partner, costs can escalate, quickly creating large and continued opex overruns. Cognitive dissonance and the 'curse of knowledge' can lead to the project budget and brainpower being invested in recreating the solution already in place today but with a different technology, leaving little time or money for working on differentiated experiences and scant to show for the investment.

With many organisations understanding that the move to cloud is no longer

a question for debate, the focus quickly turns to how, when and with whom. These are clearly key functional questions that require planning, attention and diligence. However, it is critical that programme managers do not lose sight of the 'why?'.

Moving processes to an innovative technology

of the 'why?' will be specific to individual companies and a lack of communality is not necessarily a concern. The importance is that the 'why'? is clearly articulated and is central to all aspects of the programme from business case through to delivery.

Successful programmes will define hypotheses for change at the outset and

The democratisation of compute power has paved the way for more vendors to enter the CCaaS space

stack or product must always be done with a clear understanding of what efficiencies the change will bring or what opportunities it will unlock. These could be technological, such as scale and flexibility; or could be procedural, like allowing teams to adopt agile approaches to reduce delivery cycles and have greater control of their own CX roadmap. The exact details

will continually benchmark progress against them. This process will help to keep focus and increase the probability that you will end in a different, better location to where you started.

Having successfully worked with leading brands across the globe to deliver transformational digital CX programmes we have compiled a shortlist of

points to consider before starting your journey:

Take a data centric approach: When declaring your hypotheses make sure they are quantitative, based on existing data and can be easily measured both during and after transformation.

Listen to your customers and your colleagues: Speculating in a meeting room to define perceived benefits is not only insular, it can also be extremely dangerous. Take the time to collect qualitative input through all phases of the programme to make sure you are pointing in the right direction and remain on course.

Find an experienced partner: Unless the outcome of your programme is a core competency of your business, de-risk and accelerate by working with an experienced partner. There are few prizes for blazing your own trail when a path already exists.

View technology as an enabler, not an outcome: It is easy to get excited about cool new tech but remember that it alone is inert. Technology must be coupled with a change of process or approach to create a different outcome. So start with the outcome and work back to understand which technology set can best help you get there.

Critically, review your procurement process: Paper-based approaches are seldom suited to procuring cloud technologies and often overlook the low cost, low risk opportunity to try them in a real world environment first. Make sure your process is modernised to increase your chance of success. ■

Profit from the mobile explosion

Any ICT reseller not convinced about the recurring revenues to be earned from selling mobile solutions to customers should consider the following facts and figures.

In 2025, the number of monthly active mobile internet users is projected to reach 64.83 million individuals, an increase of 16.22 million new users from 48.61 million users in 2015.

Mobile telephony services generated £3.06bn in retail revenues in Q4 2020

In the same period the number of dedicated mobile broadband subscriptions increased by 0.3 million (6.5%) to 4.8 million.

Data usage has continued to increase rapidly, up 300 Petabytes (32.3%) year-on-year to 1,229 Petabytes.

The smartphone penetration rate in the United Kingdom has increased each year, reaching an overall figure of 92 percent in 2021.

Analysts predict the global IoT market will reach $520 billion this year and 43% of devices will be moibile connected.

Investment in the Industrial Internet of Things (IIoT) is expected to climb to $123.9 billion in 2021.

All this adds up to one simple fact: There are new profit opportunities in mobile solutions for resellers that really understand the market potential, which is why Margin in Mobile 2021 is a 'must attend' event in the channel calendar.

Part of the hugely successful 'Margin in' series of events organized since 1999 by Comms Dealer, Margin in Mobile 2021 will provide the most effective platform for vendors and resellers to meet and explore these new opportunities.

During 24 hours of education and networking, you will meet a range of mobile and IoT operators, service providers, vendors and distributors all expert at helping you launch into or grow existing mobile revenues.

Margin in Mobile will help you understand:

- What's new in mobile technology?
- What mobile solutions are customers looking for?
- How can your team sell mobile and IoT more effectively?

Subjects to be debated and discussed at Margin Mobile 2021 will include:

- 5G and mobile network innovation: What's next for business mobility?
- Managing mobile: Harnessing the power of portals
- Realising the potential of mobile Apps and APIs
- The rise of wireless and Wi-Fi analytics
- The cyber threats and how to protect against them
- How to develop an end-to-end employee mobile strategy for customers
- Working with suppliers to identify the most profitable mobile solution opportunities
- How will the supply of M2M/IoT solutions fit into new 'as a service' business models?
- SIM device management
- The rise of the MVNO.

At Margin in Mobile 2021 qualified voice, mobile and data reseller delegates will be able to take advantage of:

- An educational seminar programme
- A 1-2-1 managed 'meet the suppliers' process
- A fun networking evening dinner
- Overnight accommodation
- ALL FREE OF CHARGE!

MiM sponsors line up to meet new partners

GOLD SPONSOR

"We launched our new Gamma Mobile offering earlier this year and are excited to showcase it at this event; in particular, our Tariff Optimiser service which automatically calculates the most cost-effective tariff according to usage, removing the risk of bill shock or overpayments. The opportunities presented by Mobile are huge, so we are looking forward to helping partners take advantage of them."

Mark Lomas, Head of New Business – Channel at Gamma

GOLD SPONSOR

"As partner-only mobile connectivity providers, we're delighted to be Gold Sponsors at Margin in Mobile again. Mobile data is the biggest opportunity in the Channel right now—between IoT connectivity, broadband outages and recovering from the pandemic, every industry needs it. And Margin in Mobile is the go-to platform for resellers to get a head start on winning those opportunities."

Dan Cunliffe, Managing Director – Pangea

GOLD SPONSOR

"Zest4 have been one of the channels go to partners for Mobile & IoT for the last 5 years. But IoT is a fast changing marketplace so channel IoT suppliers and Channel partners also have to keep evolving to stay ahead of the Game. Zest4 will be advising the channel of the key changes they are making to continue to support their partners and ensure they maximise the IoT Opportunity and highlighting the access tools and portals required to scale in Wholesale."

Mandy Fazelynia, Managing Director – Zest Group

SILVER SPONSOR

"At a time where it is key to add true value and differentiate yourself in the market, Margin in Mobile gives us a great opportunity to learn as well as educate the channel in how to achieve exactly that."

Mark Riddell, Head of Indirect Channel – Abzorb

SILVER SPONSOR

"We want to really engage with the reseller community and understand the key challenges they face in a time of great change. With the demand for cellular & hybrid connectivity rapidly growing, we aim to share with resellers the huge opportunity to drive new revenue afforded by Cloudcell EQ, and unlock new potential markets with our upcoming 5G solutions."

Kevin Boyle, Managing Director – Cloudcell

SILVER SPONSOR

"With a strong background in in mobile and IoT billing and extensive functionality in our solutions, we will be on hand at Margin in Mobile to provide advice and guidance on the intricacies of billing for these growth opportunities."

Shaun Bodsworth, Director – Inform Billing

REGISTER NOW AT www.margin-in-mobile.co.uk

GOLD SPONSORS

Gamma

PANGEA
Connecting Everything

zest4

SILVER SPONSORS

abzorb

cloudcell
TECHNOLOGIES

INFORM BILLING

Why still legacy billing?

The comms sector's billing segment remains largely defined by its past, with legacy systems holding many resellers back even as demands for integration and AI-type functionality becomes mainstream. According to Symbiant Technologies Director Keith Pearshouse, the obligation on billing providers now is to help resellers move on and give customers what they need.

What the channel urgently needs is to put legacy billing systems behind it – a stark requirement when brought forward into the context of the evolving technology and commercial landscape. "Billing software has always been at the heart of enabling this evolution," said Pearshouse. "Whether that's from converging project sets onto a single bill, to bringing more ICT product sets into the traditional telco proposition, and now with more services being provided as a service using the subscription model of delivery."

It should come as no surprise that resellers need to offer product, contractual and commercial flexibility, and billing software that does not support these requirements will ultimately hold resellers back, warns Pearshouse. "The traditional monthly billing cycle isn't going anywhere," he stated. "As services are started and ended billing needs to respond with no delays to get a first or final bill. The expectation now is for immediacy."

It is universally accepted that the flexible bundling and packaging of products and tariffs is key. Just as important is simplicity at the

Keith Pearshouse

point of usage – and the field is open for billing providers that remove complexity. "If resellers need degrees in software engineering to put a customer tariff together they'll seek alternative providers," added Pearshouse. "Most resellers want their billing solution to be more flexible and accessible.

"We have responded by introducing a cloud-based solution supported by APIs to wholesalers, sales management, CRM and accounting packages accessible across a range of devices. Reconciliation of supplier costs to onward billing, especially with dynamic billing periods, is also paramount. Billing systems that add this value and make life simple for resellers will succeed."

On the subject of immediacy and simplicity, automation is another key area. "This

takes the effort out of billing processes, customer updates, renewals and billing checks," commented Pearshouse. "The benefits of automation apply whether the reseller manages their own billing operation or works with a billing provider who offers a managed bureau solution."

Differentiation
Value add, supported by strong relationships between resellers and billing providers, have always been priorities – and these requirements provide fertile ground for developing points of differentiation. Yet Pearshouse has observed that the process of billing in itself is perhaps dropping down the list of important criteria for resellers when selecting providers. "Nowadays, all systems are highly capable and can be expected to meet resellers' billing needs – for the core industry product range at least, and increasingly the

more complex and specialist propositions," he said.

"But an understanding of end customer data offers resellers the opportunity to tailor solutions by identifying early patterns that may impact revenues, and optimise margins by packaging the right solutions with the knowledge that consumption of any usage-based products within the package isn't going to bust margins. Adding the next layer introduces AI and being able to monitor usage through the month and dynamically adjust packages to best match trends – whether that's the retail package to the customer or the wholesale package being resold."

For Symbiant, breaking industry barriers is second nature, but it has not yet broken the sound barrier. So Pearshouse is ramping up the volume. "Symbiant has been relatively quiet over the past few years, focusing on what we deliver to our established customer base," he stated. "We're now stepping out of the shadows and working with new partners. We're continuing to evolve our SymBILL product and our current focus areas are around improving the resellers' end-to-end operation. In life customer management, contracts

and payments are areas that link closely with billing. While not core to billing itself, any processes that resellers have to undertake manually runs the risk of creating a billing issue, so we're exploring how we can optimise these processes.

"We have integrated with Sage for a few years and recently added integration with Xero, an accounting package that is increasingly cost-effective for resellers. Similarly, we have integrated with sales management and CRM platforms. This integration is geared towards making the billing and related processes simpler for resellers thereby giving them more time to focus on their business growth."

It is Pearshouse's hope that legacy billing systems and processes will be consigned not just to memory but to oblivion. "Resellers rightly demand and expect their billing software solution to be able to meet both generic and unique needs," he stated. "They do not want to be held back because of system inflexibility or having to wait in a queue for a new functionality to be delivered, and risk missing out on the opportunity they have identified. Adaptability and customisation has always been important to stay ahead of the game." ∎

Do you want to click with the Channel?

Looking to share your content with our ICT channel community? We can distribute your content via our print, digital and social media channels. Great for thought leadership content, product launches and event promotion.

To click with the ICT channel online and reach this audience, call us on....

01895 454603

A man who makes smart

Look closely at the workings of a modern day billing company and you will see a microcosm of the wider market and glimpses beyond the comms sector's periphery – and PRD Intelligent Billing is no exception. Here, Managing Director Simon Adams shares insights into how he is pushing those boundaries and challenging the norm.

P RD's rebrand to Intelligent Billing is reflective of how the company sees itself and where the market is heading, adding a sharper focus on new developments that are coming thick and fast. "Telecoms billing is our core market," stated Adams. "We process 4.5 billion telecom related data records every month, but this market is changing, growth is plateauing with more consolidations and changing requirements."

Adams noted a shift towards more bespoke requirements, API integrations and new sector data streams – and responded accordingly. "There is still demand for our out-of-the-box reseller platform, which we continue to develop, but this is a competitive market," he added. "Responding to this shift means we now process data for secure satellite communications, IT cloud distributors, PPC Internet billing for advertisers and more. We did not set out to target these sectors, they found us from attending events, networking and referrals which broadened our thinking. We never say no to a new challenge."

PRD Intelligent Billing has witnessed 20 per cent growth in turnover over the last 18 months due

Simon Adams

Too many businesses are still operating costly and time consuming legacy systems

to a combination of new customers in telecoms and IT distribution, but also new and growing requirements from existing telecom customers. This includes a 12 per cent increase in overseas opportunities: The company is about to go live with a telco in south east Asia and another in mainland Europe. "Our target for the next 12 months is to increase our presence in the cloud solutions providers and VAR markets," added Adams. "We are also busy with several new telecom

implementations, including a major fibre broadband Internet service provider."

Challenging projects
Adams works with several Systems Integrators with a particular focus on scalability and automations. "One integrator recently asked PRD to resolve a requirement to process and report on potentially four million monthly records across a million customers as a single output on a single invoice for a wholesale/interconnect billing requirement," said

Adams. "We love a challenge and have already figured out how to do this."

Adams' knack for figuring things out can be traced back to his pre-comms background in corporate banking and accountancy. He is a qualified chartered accountant and took a role as Finance Director of Paradigm Research & Development in 2000, which specialised in high volume interconnect billing for global telecoms carriers, but the client base eventually became non-

profitable due to market and client changes and the strategy adopted by previous shareholders.

"An MBO opportunity arose in 2006 and we identified a new direction, from complex niche solutions to a generic approach combined with bespoke capabilities to appeal to the wider SME sector," explained Adams. "This resulted in an increased customer base and reduced risk from over dependency on a few large customers. KPN remains a partner today and our systems process every fixed line call in The Netherlands. My background in finance has given me an insight into what finance departments need to make data processing and billing easier and more accurate."

The MBO resulted in PRD Technologies being formed. "We did not want to go down the route of 'one size fits all' so found a good compromise," added Adams. "We appreciate not all resellers are the same so we created systems to reflect this."

The software, originally named QuickStart Billing, was rebranded in 2019 to Intelligent Billing. In more recent years the company has diversified into other markets such as MS cloud variable billing

moves in billing

at both distribution and VAR levels, and into DaaS and Fintech to complement telecoms. "We've invested large amounts of time and resource on R&D to make data processing and billing as simple as possible, with feature rich, highly scalable and automated platforms at all levels across our suite of products," added Adams.

Automation strategy
Adams' aim is to automate every process where possible, coming up with solutions other vendors struggle to resolve. He says this is possible due to PRD's fourth generation programming language. "Our automation capabilities mean we no longer offer bureau billing as a service because our Intelligent Billing software now does this automatically," he commented. "We aim to automate as much of the billing process as possible for hassle-free and accurate solutions for our customers."

Increased integrations with third party systems is also a top priority, including APIs (MS Dynamics CRM, online banking for payment collections and rejections, various Marketplace, MS Partner Centre APIs etc). Other items currently on Adams' mind are greater (as mentioned) diversifications into new markets such as DaaS, Fintech, SaaS, cloud consumption and subscription services etc; overseas billing functionality including US multi-tax compliance systems, currency, and multilingual billing; more bespoke solutions; portal development; enhanced management reporting and data analytics; and evolving PRD's out-of-the-box telecoms and VAR reseller platforms.

"Resellers should maintain a flexible and agile strategy with the ability to quickly adapt and change direction on their roadmap in line with new innovations," said Adams. "But too many businesses are still operating costly and time consuming legacy systems, either because they are locked in or believe there are no viable alternatives, or because they believe the migration process is too costly and time consuming."

Larger enterprises (telcos and distributors) with bespoke requirements are Adams' biggest opportunity. "We use the same technology and incorporate new R&D into our Intelligent Billing reseller systems (Lite, Lite+ and Pro) wherever possible," he added. "Cloud Solutions Providers and Fintech are other areas in which we are developing new functionality. There is also an increase in Black-Box requirements. This is where our platform is used as a rating engine only, but the output goes to a third party accounting system and/or CRM for invoicing."

PRD already had hybrid subscription and multi-sector consumable systems in place pre-Covid having already identified this as a rapid growth requirement. "The cloud space is growing exponentially in line with digital transformation and online services – we perceive this as a sector that will continuously grow and develop at a rapid rate," noted Adams. "Our roadmap has always been flexible, so we can quickly accommodate new customer requirements and market demands. We are bringing in new development resources to further handle roadmap R&D." ∎

Just a minute with Simon Adams...

Role models: My maturing teenage kids. They teach me many new things by the way they behave and interact, or not in some cases. They keep me grounded.

Tell us something about yourself we don't know: I was a Nordic ski-jumper in my youth and fluent in Norwegian and Swedish. I'm an ex-aviator/pilot with multiple ratings, but it's an expensive dream to pursue and I ran out of money! And I met and chatted with Mohammed Ali in 1982.

If you weren't in ICT what would you be doing? Something in aviation.

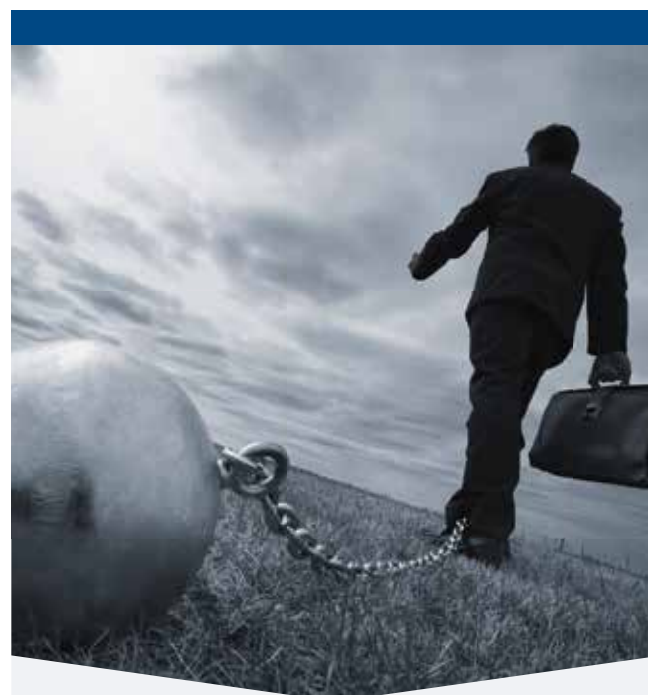**Lesson learnt:** Do not be marketing shy. We kept our achievements to ourselves.

Biggest fear: Getting bored and becoming demotivated.

Your strong points and what could you work on? My attention span and drifting mind can be a weakness. On the strong side I'm approachable and easy to work with. But I need to work on maintaining energy levels as I get older.

One example of something you have overcome: Challenges within the education system when I was younger. I wasn't academic and struggled with most subjects. But something clicked at 16 and I went on to attain a degree and professional qualifications.

Three ideal dinner guests: George Mallory and his Everest climbing companion Sandy Irvine. Both perished high on the mountain without any communication or evidence as to whether they summited. Also, any WW2 Lancaster pilot or crew.

The biggest risk you have taken: The MBO: Taking on a struggling business at high cost, with little support and kids on the way.

CNA

COMMS NATIONAL AWARDS

7TH OCTOBER, MAYFAIR, LONDON

A GOLDEN NIGHT FOR THE STARS OF THE ICT CHANNEL

DON'T MISS THE CHANCE TO GO FOR GOLD!

THERE'S STILL TIME TO GET THE RECOGNITION YOU DESERVE BY ENTERING THE CHANNEL'S MOST PRESTIGIOUS AWARDS

Yes, we have extended the 2021 Comms National Awards deadline to August 11th, so don't miss the opportunity to put your company in the limelight.

This is the No. 1 awards programme for recognising excellence in the ICT channel and represents a golden opportunity to acknowledge the amazing work you have carried out for customers and channel partners over the course of the last, highly challenging, year.

The glittering Comms National Awards gala dinner – recognised as the best night out in the industry - is scheduled to take place fully live once again at The Hilton on Park Lane on October 7th.

Now in their 20th year, the Comms National Awards is the ICT channel's most respected and coveted prize and now's the time to go for 2021 Gold!

Sponsored for the second time this year by DWS and independently judged by a panel of distinguished industry experts, The Comms National Awards recognises quality across the channel spectrum with awards in both reseller (customer solutions) and vendor (service to the channel) categories.

This year, we will salute the efforts made by channel businesses in the supply of collaborations solutions, which have been so vital during the Covid crisis and also the success of the Altnets, who are helping to connect Britain to high bandwidth full fibre. And, as ever, one individual will be presented with the illustrious Entrepreneur of the Year Award to recognise his or her efforts in growing a highly successful channel business. We will also recognise channel efforts to improve Diversity and Sustainability.

For all the categories see www.cnawards.com

"The Comms National Awards is the UK's leading awards process for the ICT channel and whether companies are winners or finalists, the prestige and PR they can gain from participating is huge. In these challenging times I would urge everyone in the channel to get involved and put their name into the hat," said Comms Dealer Editorial Director Nigel Sergent.

The CN Awards is the ultimate channel celebration. Be part of it.

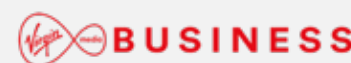## DWS PROUD TO HONOUR THE CHANNEL'S BEST OF THE BEST

"This is a fantastic awards process and the awards night itself is always the highlight of the year, bringing together everyone in the Channel for a night of celebration," said Digital Wholesale Solutions Chief Executive Officer, Terry O'Brien.

"The effort entrants put into these awards is exemplary and we know the value our teams place on being shortlisted. Our industry has done some amazing things during the Covid-19 pandemic, keeping the NHS and other key organisations communicating effectively and the CNAs gives Channel companies a wonderful opportunity to reward and recognise those efforts. I truly hope more organisations than ever will enter this year and show the country what we are made of and what we have achieved during this challenging time.

"We were delighted to sponsor the awards for the first time last year and, although it had to be run virtually, it was still great to see how the industry pulled together to celebrate our achievements. This year we're so looking forward to a fully live event and I'm sure the atmosphere at finals night will be extra special. We can't wait to celebrate and congratulate everyone in the Channel at this very special occasion."

Headline Sponsor

digital wholesale solutions

Category Sponsors

Gamma

Knight CORPORATE FINANCE

UNION STREET Powering your potential

Virgin Media BUSINESS

A WORD FROM OUR SPONSORS...

Gamma

The Channel is at the heart of everything we do at Gamma, so we are pleased to show our support by sponsoring the UC Solution category at this year's Comms National Awards. Relationships are key to us at Gamma, and we look forward to seeing the community who make up the Channel in-person in October. Good luck to all the finalists, we hope you enjoy the event!

Andy Smethurst
Channel Sales Director
Gamma

INFORM BILLING

"Inform Billing are delighted to be one again supporting the industry's most prestigious and hotly contested awards, recognising excellence across the ICT channel. We have experienced the significant impact winning one of these coveted awards have for the winners and, on behalf of Inform Billing, I would like to wish all entrants the very best of luck. We look forward to getting the channel back together on what will be an extremely fun and enjoyable night!"

Ellie Allseybrook
Head of Business Growth
Inform Billing

UNION STREET
Powering your potential

This year's CNAs is perhaps the most highly anticipated ever, as the industry's top performers can finally meet in person to celebrate the achievements of the past year. Union Street is delighted to once again sponsor the Vertical Market Customer Solution award, and we're looking forward to hear of the innovative ways in which resellers have positively impacted their customers' businesses, something we all desire to achieve. On behalf of myself and all at Union Street, I would like to wish the best of luck to all finalists.

Vincent Disneur
Managing Director, Union Street

Together we can
vodafone business

We are very proud to be sponsoring the Best Mobile/ IoT Solution Category at this year's CNA Awards. At Vodafone UK, we understand the joint value in treating our partners as exactly that - partners. Supporting each other to equally win, working collaboratively whilst providing the best capabilities, value and experience for partners and their end customers. We believe that we are better together, for all manner of Data, Internet, Voice solutions. Congratulations to all the finalists.

Kathy Quashie
Director Enterprise Indirect
Partnerships, Vodafone

IMPORTANT NOTICE:

PLEASE NOTE THAT ENHANCED/DESIGNED ENTRIES WILL NO LONGER BE ACCEPTED. ALL ENTRANTS MUST USE THE ENTRY FORM ONLY. SUPPORTING INFORMATION PRESENTED IN PDF FORMAT WILL BE ACCEPTED, ALONG WITH RELEVANT VIDEO LINKS.

To register your entry and download the entry forms go to **www.cnawards.com**

Category Sponsors

Together we can
vodafone business

Voiceflex

Hospitality Sponsors

INFORM BILLING

TalkTalk Wholesale Services

Defining a long-term bil

The big intent of leading channel billing providers is to create a dynamically driven balance between their software R&D and the demands of a fast evolving market. Only then, they say, can resellers ensure that their strategic plans will deliver growth and contribute to long-term sustainability.

This month's expert panel is clear that the provision of appropriate billing software and services is fundamental to the success of reseller growth strategies. And according to Inform Billing Managing Director Shaun Bodsworth, the contraction of traditional services has opened the floodgates for resellers to deliver new sources of value. "We are seeing paradigm shifts in business fundamentals and the channel reinventing itself to adapt to the opportunity," he stated. "The possibilities for wider streams of revenue generation from each customer are there for the taking – and a billing platform enables the delivery of monetisation opportunities. Cloud technology facilitates the addition of new services and products – but the strategy needs to be thought through first."

Moving forward with strategic confidence goes hand in hand with analysing past trends, noted Bodsworth. He says reseller growth strategies work best when based on billing reporting analysis, practiced and assimilated as an integral part of the overall plan, not merely an initiative. "Predicting future scenarios and acting on them involves close assessment of billing intelligence to determine potential risks and identify the drivers for new opportunities by tracking customer behaviour," he said. "This needs to be a continuous process until it becomes part of the culture across the entire business."

Laying your hands on meaningful analytics requires an investment in time, people and systems, as well as an understanding of where to get the most insightful data and the tools to consolidate the information. But the rewards are worth the investment in time and money. "By pulling data together you can see the overall picture and truly understand the customer and how they like to be served and supported," added Bodsworth. "The opportunity is there to easily deploy new products, services and pricing bundles to boost revenues and market share."

As well as data analytics, cloud-based billing software provides an opportunity for revenue monetisation. No longer hampered by time and resource consuming manual processes, resellers can be more creative and deliver proactive solutions, rather than react to change. That's not all. "The value of digital transformation offered by cloud-based billing makes the supply chain more efficient, agile and customer-focused," added Bodsworth. "It brings down the walls between silos

Shaun Bodsworth

The possibilities for wider streams of revenue generation from each customer are there for the taking – and a billing platform enables the delivery of monetisation opportunities.

and becomes a completely integrated ecosystem that is fully transparent. It enables resellers to react quickly and even anticipate scenarios, therefore implement real-time change as well as achieve earlier revenue collection. Manual systems that create inaccurate billing for the complex scenarios can be a thing of the past, with automated systems delivering through clever APIs."

Key investment
Inform Billing invests over 45 per cent of revenues into increasing its software capabilities, mainly around business intelligence data, monetisation through product and service offerings, or increasing self-serve capabilities. A current priority is the development of API and integration capabilities to deliver more streamlined processes, not just for isolated billing strategies but the wider reseller business. "A key part of our service is to make the billing data and reporting capability as easily available as possible," commented Bodsworth. "Moving forward, resellers need access to integration tools to consolidate their data into a data warehouse or an analytics programme."

More powerful, flexible and accurate billing and analysis capabilities are now essential for success in the evolving commercial landscape, reiterated Simon Adams, Managing Director, PRD Intelligent Billing. "This is especially the case for businesses that need to rapidly scale their customer base and adapt fluidly," he said. "A wider and more flexible monetisation strategy is required, along with systems and software capable of accurately processing, analysing and billing the data for increasingly complex and integrated revenue streams."

Against this backdrop of unprecedented industry change – not to mention Covid-19 factors - all service providers are continually having to review, adapt and redefine their monetisation strategies in line with the need to diversify and expand their offerings across the channel. "To be successful, businesses require billing platforms that can flex with them, providing accurate, real-time reporting capabilities and data analysis," added Adams. "Accurate data analysis and reporting is crucial to ensuring opportunities and monetisation strategies are optimised to maximise revenue potential."

Intelligent Billing covers multiple market sectors and data streams with options to converge all invoicing into a single monthly or ad-hoc

ling strategy

bill and reports, all of which can be tailored to the end customer. "Accurate, real-time billing and reporting capabilities provides resellers with the data and analytics to assess end customer performance and value," said Adams. "This enables them to quickly identify which services and offerings are performing or may need additional resources and investment to maximise opportunities. Resellers can quickly modify their business model accordingly."

Integration with other key business systems, such as accounting software, combines data from multiple sources to produce tailored intuitive reports that support strategy planning, noted Adams. "Seamless API integrations into third party best-of-breed software systems is essential," he added. "We will be investing in the continued development of our API capabilities and new innovations in this area. We also aim to automate wherever possible to simplify the billing and analysis process. The ongoing evolution of billing systems

enables resellers to offer flexible, tailored packages and bundles to customers."

Automation
Automation is also key to success – but only if data is fully harnessed, concurs Tekton Billing Director Harry McKeever, who cited an adage – if you're not assessing, you're guessing. "Telecoms billing is awash with data, from which valuable insights can be learnt, but the right platform is required to translate and visualise that data into actionable insights," he said. "Some platforms are guilty of dumping reams of raw data, giving the illusion that there's easy access to lots of information. But in reality, raw data tells us very little, and even if you're exporting data and manipulating it in an external system like Excel, then you're wasting precious time on a platform that's not working for you. Visualisation and comprehension, rather than raw data, is key."

Resellers can truly enhance their operations, but only if the data leads them to the following discoveries, pointed out McKeever

– from identifying upsell opportunities for customers reaching or breaching bundle consumption; the refinement of wholesale shared bundle allocations; identifying subtle customer churn characteristics before it's too late; spotting carrier billing inaccuracies and assuring revenues (and more). "These days, it's also more common to expect regular fluctuations in monthly billing as end users add and remove users from their subscriptions," added McKeever. "And with the increased volume of subscription provisioning it's plausible that mistakes can happen and billing will be forgotten. So, the ability to reconcile imported supplier subscription charges is paramount.

"It's critical that a billing system can handle these mid-month quantity changes elegantly and accurately. Having to cease a service charge and restart a new one can often be clumsy, error prone and offers little in the way of continuity of reporting. And a good billing system allows for date driven amends to charges, without having to treat it as a separate charge altogether. Meaning more accurate billing and less chance of a frustrated call from an end user with bill shock."

Traditional services are all too often similar to products sold by the competition, so resellers are advised to differentiate through other outlets such as value adds and inventive commercials, pointed out McKeever. "Billing vendors will typically advise that it's best practice to keep any pricing standard and uniform," he added. "In a perfect world we'd

Simon Adams

Accurate data analysis and reporting is crucial to ensuring opportunities and monetisation strategies are optimised.

agree. But sadly, it's often deficiencies in the billing system that lead to this recommendation. Plus, in the real world, bespoke pricing is unavoidable! However, Tekton believes that resellers shouldn't be limited by their billing platform, and bespoke pricing needn't be a taboo subject."

Billing is, arguably, the most regular touchpoint resellers have with their partners, and the right billing solution and portal will give that all important sticky factor rather than being regarded as just a back office tool. "Businesses can only grow efficiently after they address customer churn," stated McKeever. "That's why much of Tekton's efforts have been focused on developing a strong customer portal."

And within the overall objective of delivering value to customers, we can see that momentum towards the key themes of analytics, the cloud, integration and more streamlined processes must be achieved. Onecom's acquisition of 9 in March brings a wider capability in these areas through an extended team of development experts as well as new technologies and resources, focusing on integration capabilities, speed, insight and increased intelligence, all cited as areas for innovation by Nick Jarrett, Head of Revenue Management & Billing at

Harry McKeever

Telecoms billing is awash with data from which valuable insights can be learnt, but the right platform is required to translate and visualise that data into actionable insights.

9 Group. "This ensures that billing systems are open and transparent, so that data can be read and interpreted and customer led change can be implemented swiftly," he said.

Critical analytics

"Analysing and understanding your billing data is absolutely critical to maintaining a profitable customer base. By using billing software to monitor data trends, you can stay a step ahead and adjust your offering to help protect and grow margins. Customer behaviours are constantly evolving and the pandemic has accelerated change in a way that we could never have predicted. Businesses across the board are under pressure to understand and respond, and there is pressure to diversify revenue streams to protect and grow margins."

Billing systems are designed to identify and map changes around customer behaviour and usage. Shrewd partners will lean on this for regular commercial intelligence, rather than simply using their billing software as a mechanism to issue invoices. "By using billing software to monitor change, proactive partners have reshaped their commercials to fit with the current climate," said Jarrett.

From the customers' perspective, the role of billing software is to manage the seamless presentation of complex billing data. They want a single bill which arrives on time and is clear and accurate. "But billing needs to be so much more than simply a processing function," added Jarrett. "There is an opportunity for service providers to deliver a real value add by supporting partners and their customers with the entire managed billing and support wrap."

"The human element of billing should never be overlooked. Partners should look to their service provider for a more human level of support beyond the processing and production of their customers' bills. This can include follow up support, the management of customer billing queries, commercial insight and helping partners to make sense of their billing data." ■

Nick Jarrett

Partners should look to their service provider for a more human level of support beyond the processing and production of customers' bills.

Empowered by billing

Behind the digital disruption of the market the evolution of billing systems is the big event, according to Samantha Dennahy, Product Owner for Union Street Technologies. Here, she shares insights into what it takes for billing systems to remain responsive to the needs of an ever evolving market.

Among the factors influencing demand for modern day billing solutions are Covid related market catalysts and the accelerating march of digitalisation – and a big issue now is whether resellers have the knowledge they need to navigate unprecedented industry change. "It's become more important than ever for resellers to truly understand the data they hold for their end customers and the products they currently use," stated Dennahy. "Resellers need to adapt to changes, and the right billing system is a lynchpin to the monetisation of emerging opportunities."

Having the right data at hand in a condensed and understandable format can help a reseller to react quickly to changes within the industry. "Data analysis tools will support a reseller to produce targeted sales and cross-sell marketing campaigns to win more business and drive revenue," added Dennahy. "A blend of facilities will enable resellers to achieve best value, and it is critical that their billing system can cope with this blend if they are to offer best value and compete with rival suppliers."

The blend of functionality in question includes a billing system that is flexible, unlocks new markets and creates stand-out and competitive product propositions. "Portals, apps and APIs are an essential toolkit to give resellers the ability to more effectively connect with end customers," explained Dennahy. "These tools also give the customer more control over their own services and options, and make it easy for them to interact with their reseller at the right time and in the most appropriate way."

Portals and apps also provide a quick and easy way for resellers to market new products and drive additional business, noted Dennahy. "Billing and provisioning go hand in hand so when a billing system expands into automated provisioning, it's powerful," she added. "A billing system can remove many of the issues that a complicated supply chain can bring. A strong reconciliation process within a billing system will take a lot of the stress out of managing multiple supplier files every month."

The billing system should therefore do all of the hard work and provide resellers with a processed and clear set of data regardless of the supplier. The end customer also benefits as they get one clear and concise bill that consolidates all of their product set, and one reseller to contact and work with.

Samantha Dennahy

A blend of facilities will enable resellers to achieve best value

"Putting the power into the hands of the end customer to place orders themselves, directly onto the reseller's preferred supplier, and for the billing to be automatically generated upon completion of the order, saves the reseller time and effort while proactively driving sales and revenues," said Dennahy.

Automating the common transactions for reseller businesses helps to reduce costs while boosting productivity. Increased automation can also put more power in the hands of end customers by enabling them to self-serve and buy additional products via resellers' branded portals. "By understanding common issues within the billing environment we can also help resellers to manage customer queries; and we are investing in bot technology to help reduce the burden of customer queries landing on support teams," commented Dennahy.

It is clear for all to see that effective billing and revenue assurance is key to ensuring profitability. Information is powerful but it can be difficult to get hold of in the right format, especially when dealing with large volumes of data and disparate source systems. "Having all data in one billing system has benefits for the reseller, making management of their end customers and their products simpler and more effective," reiterated Dennahy. "Presenting this data back to end customers so they understand their bills and do not bombard support departments with queries and demands for credits is critical to the success of a reseller's portfolio."

She also noted that if a reseller's system can understand and bill cloud usage and licencing effectively, and in a way that end customers can understand, then the advantages of cloud solutions can be realised without taking margin risk. "Our vision is to help partners become bigger, better and more profitable through the suite of new cloud-based software products we're bringing to market," commented Dennahy.

"We plan to revolutionise the sale to bill process, focusing on automation, empowering the end customer and providing partners with the insight they need to grow and shape their business. Consultancy services help partners unlock the true value in their customer base. This will also help our partners to optimise costs, allowing them to develop more competitive propositions and generate more business." ■

SPITFIRE®

VOICE • INTERNET • WAN

Telecoms and IP Engineering
Solutions for Business since 1988

Blue Wildebeest
[Connochaetes taurinus]

The Great Migration is the largest herd movement of animals on the planet involving an astonishing 1.5 million Blue Wildebeest.

Get ahead of the great migration to IP Cloud Telephony with Spitfire's Hosted PBX 2.1.

The UK analogue and ISDN network is being phased out by 2025, so with free connection and only £6 per user per month, why wait to upgrade your telephone system?

Spitfire's Hosted PBX 2.1

Our fully featured hosted telephony solution allows you to stay connected from anywhere - head office, branch office or home. Ideal for today's more flexible style of working.

Call resiliency is included as standard and there's no need to compromise on call quality either, with our Voice Approved Broadband or Ethernet options.

Since charges are 'per user' it can easily adapt and scale to your business requirements.

Features include:
Easy set-up
Web-based Console
Call Management/Routing
Softphone integration
Access using handset, laptop, PC or mobile phone

Spitfire Network Services Ltd:
Training TechTalks

Sales 020 7501 3333 • Partner Services 020 7501 3150

Innovative • Flexible • Reliable • Supportive • Cost Effective

www.spitfire.co.uk

Harnessing evolution

As lockdown restrictions ease and a new 'everyday' dawns, many business owners could face another of the biggest challenges of their history, with a new paradigm of work on one side and the rise of the customer experience on the other. So now, more than ever, it is a time best suited for those able to ride the wave of change, according to VanillaIP Sales Director Iain Sinnott.

Iain Sinnott

I t is a fact that Covid will likely catalyse a new paradigm of work, where staff performance will be measured far more by results and outputs. For example: Time is a long established measure of work. People 'clock on and off', and people are 'paid by hours' etc. But in the new hybrid work environment it is possible that conventional thinking on time and the workplace will be overturned, with success measured more against strategic goals – chief of which should be the customer experience, believes Sinnott.

"The customer is king, and customer satisfaction is the measure of success," he said. "In our industry, a 30 day tenure means you must deliver well and invest in evolutions such as the way we now evaluate workplace performance.

As providers of Productivity as a Service we need to make sure we have the tools to fit businesses at different stages of their evolution. The early adopters are fully embracing hybrid working and are probably recreating the relationship they have with staff in terms of rewarding work quality rather than hours completed, while others will be cautiously evolving from the ways of the old office-centric workforce."

Sinnott maintains that communications providers will in all probability need to make time and motion data available as part of the reporting pack. "Old school managers can sign off that they have had their pound of flesh, while also encouraging the development of customer satisfaction scores and other quality measures that our tools can bring," added Sinnott. "Optimising humans

and automating tasks that don't require people is essentially our business, so we need to be packing applications and services which address both, and across a spectrum of differing needs and viable budgets."

New approach

As Sinnott says, this trend requires a new sales approach to customers, one that includes the shift towards measuring and optimising outputs, identifying relevant KPIs, the use of targets, driving performance value and productivity. "Reseller sales people need more than ever to work with customers to understand where the value is in their operational processes, and bring in technology that reduces loss and increases gain," commented Sinnott. "This sounds simple, and to a degree it is, but only if you have a portfolio of choices."

Within the resellers' own teams, believes Sinnott, the focus may have to shift from seats to revenue, and from core product sales to additional application adoption. "A big base of low function, core voice users is hard to defend and essentially means you have left others to profit from meeting/collaboration, connectivity, mobility, CX, reporting and especially non-voice services like chat, SMS, WhatsApp, social media and email queues," he commented. "New suppliers with these channels will sweep your voice base away."

Furthermore, being always on and always ready for change is another big challenge for organisations affected by the work from home shift. "Being always on and permanently set for change is a big opportunity, and also a massive threat," added

Sinnott. "If you have an established recurring revenue model, great customer service and a well automated back office system then embracing the real-time, on-demand 30 day agreement culture gives you a powerful message. If you are confident of the quality you bring then you can undermine much of the competition who sign on multiple years to generate short-term cash flow."

There was a time when customers had unquestioningly naturalised three, five or even seven year agreements and didn't quibble over the principles. That scenario has changed beyond recognition. "Now, businesses have experienced mass disruption," added Sinnott. "They have also experienced the introduction of 30 day communication apps which can be consumed, used and given back if the RoI is not met."

For companies struggling to adapt to this new 'everyday' reality, Sinnott's advice is clear if not blunt. "I could say that if you are still struggling to divorce your business from the past and focus on the new cloud portfolio opportunities, it is time to sell," he commented. "But in reality there is still time to take action. So partner with a true portfolio provider not a simplistic bundle. Adapt to a new commercial model and educate yourself and your team on the technology that can revolutionise the effectiveness of your customers' businesses. If you don't, you have no long-term place as their trusted advisor and no security in the revenue that you can retain going forward. It is important to move fast if you are in the wrong partnerships." ∎

Your magazine, your channel
Keeping us all together

Since Covid 19 hit, Comms Dealer has delivered breakthrough on-line events, round tables, webinars and videos. And via our website and magazine has continued to give you the news and information you need in these challenging times. We have published a magazine every month since May 1996. Nothing is going to stop us keeping you engaged and doing business.

It's what we do.

comms
dealer

www.comms-dealer.com

Diversity breeds success but n

Two months ago our kaleidoscope contributors assessed the digital skills gap, but the lack of diversity in employment is another issue that could slow economic healing post-pandemic, writes Greg Denholm.

Why not kill two birds with one stone? With plenty of ICT jobs to fill, now seems the perfect time to encourage people from all backgrounds to start their tech careers.

The benefits of a diverse workforce were explored in the McKinsey & Company's 2018 'Delivering through Diversity' report. It found that organisations in the top quartile for gender diversity on executive teams were 21 per cent more likely to excel in profitability and 27 per cent more likely to outperform in value creation.

Furthermore, companies in the top-quartile for ethnic/cultural diversity on executive teams were 33 per cent more likely to have industry-leading profitability.

However, the proportion of men and women being appointed directors of tech companies in the UK has remained flat since 2000, according to a 2020 Tech Nation report.

The same report showed that only 19 per cent of UK tech workers are women, 15 per cent are from BAME backgrounds and a BCS Consulting report adds that only 8 per cent have disabilities.

So, are channel players equipping their teams with the skills to hire from a more diverse pool of talent and are they aware of any unconscious bias affecting their decisions?

Responses from the ICT channel leaders we questioned on the issue indicate that while some industry players are helping redress the balance, there is still a lot of work to be done to develop workplaces that include people from all walks of life.

JOHNATHAN ZEMLIK
WAVENET

"The ICT Channel is a tale of two companies, and the most successful ones are embracing diversity and inclusion! Adopting the next generation of disruptive technology relies on different perspectives and companies actively seeking a diverse workforce. Companies that sign-post support to LGBTQ*, gender diversity, BAME, Neuro-diverse and Disability inclusion will be more agile, more empathetic and able to stay on the leading edge of technology. Yet, there are many companies that don't think about D&I, assuming they don't need it. Often their workforces are homogenous and stagnate, giving these companies a blind spot. Furthermore, as a decision-maker, checking which companies have solid CSR and inclusion credentials is something I always undertake when tendering for partners. Just like many of my end clients and prospects ask for those credentials in turn. If you're not thinking about it, you should start. If not, ambitious, inclusive and agile firms are coming for you!"

LORRIN WHITE
BAMBOO
TECHNOLOGY GROUP

"2020 delivered numerous opportunities to review and reset the diversity challenge in ICT, building on a growing awareness and momentum for change. The pandemic set us back and now old ground needs to be recovered. The gender diversity discussion seems to have fared well in the channel though. And, with tools like the free gender decoders for job ads, stats and advice aplenty there seems to be a demonstrable push towards change. Gender now feels a more familiar discussion, whereas race, religion, disability, and sexual orientation are still not, so there is much to do to tackle the recruitment challenge. The fear around 'getting it wrong' in discussion is as rife as bias itself and so the channel needs to address 'how' to discuss and change, else I fear diversity becoming another monitored statistic. Discussion and action are essential for the ICT channel to fully commit."

KATHY QUASHIE
VODAFONE UK

"The channel has an opportunity to drive real change in how we add value for the customer by ensuring that the workforce is representative of the community we sell into, and that comes by using a diverse talent pool. Without this, we lack the future skills and the thinking needed to drive innovation. We need to start working outside the usual comfort zone to realise these opportunities, by changing how we recruit, while upskilling where needed. While there has been a good dialogue so far, there still isn't the progress needed to see visible action. Representation is pivotal and it starts from the top - we need to raise awareness and educate on how bias slows progress. This is a critical moment to energise people and create a new legacy by ensuring business policies are inclusive and have real impact."

CRISSI WILLIAMS
ITP

"We know there is a gender split in our industry. The WISE Campaign has some stats on how big this gap is: only 24 per cent of the STEM workforce are women. This has been a focus for us over the past few years, but particularly as we come out of the pandemic with unemployment rising. We can't sit back and accept these stats any longer, and it's not just the recruitment that's the challenge – it's attracting a more diverse workforce to the industry in the first place. We have re-examined everything from job titles to the wording in our recruitment ads. We realised that even certain job titles could put off potential candidates, and yet a few tweaks can attract an entirely different demographic. By understanding the barriers to entry, we aim to change the perception of the industry and demonstrate that it's open to all – regardless of gender or background."

more commitment is required

"Frankly, I'm tired and drained by people asking the same old question about whether enough is being done about diversity. If that question needs asking – then we already have our answer. I'm also frustrated that diversity is still a question – as opposed to inclusion, or equity, or justice. And that frustration boils over when I look at the headlines of the McKinsey report and I go "No sh*t, Sherlock!" That's genuinely not a criticism of the report – it's a frustration that such a basic and obvious conclusion still needs reporting. Anyone who knows me is aware of how close to my heart this issue is – so I'm afraid I am not going to present any suggestions or magic solutions… or talk about what we're doing to try and address the issue. However, if anybody does want to discuss it with me – they are welcome to get in touch."

ROB MUKHERJEE
EVERYCLOUD

"As business owners/leaders we need to trust in the team we have around us regardless of their gender, race, religion, sexual orientation or disability. There is certainly the effort by the industry to be diverse, however the biggest issue is quite often the lack of support from the government. Maternity support and encouragement to return to work is a major issue and until that is addressed there will always be a significantly low number of successful women in tech compared to men. From a recruitment perspective we do see a lot of older candidates bypassed and this is a concern as they do have a lot to offer, however, there have been huge efforts by the industry to be more inclusive and it will improve over time, but it certainly won't be an overnight fix."

DARROL STEVENS
NEOCI

"The channel is making progress but there is still some way to go before all backgrounds are represented. Organisations must ensure they're doing their bit to encourage those from differing backgrounds to apply and progress. This can be achieved through diversity acceleration programmes or apprenticeships, inclusive initiatives that provide an opportunity for everyone to forge a successful career. It's imperative to give a voice to underrepresented groups so there is greater transparency and education – critical aspects of addressing the imbalance. Networking groups and reverse mentoring can lead to new conversations and a renewed understanding about how the industry can evolve for all. Now is the time for individuals and brands to lead by example. Senior teams must have greater awareness of the challenges some face, while the industry's larger organisations must use their influence to create initiatives that fuel conversations and keep partners thinking about what they can do better."

ALEX TEMPEST
BT WHOLESALE

"Despite significant developments in recruitment processes, an increased awareness in conscious and unconscious bias, efforts to promote careers in STEM and widened access to educational opportunities, we still see a lack of diversity within our industry talent. By tapping into the potential of our society the industry is more innovative and better at serving its purpose. Organisations must be clear on the culture they want to create and have the right reasons for doing so to break down the barriers underrepresented communities face. Simply put, the brand organisations are selling must match the employee experience. Diversifying an organisation must be done from the heart of the company. A starting place would be to: broaden hiring decisions to encourage a diversity of individuals and views, avoid communications that can discourage BAME and LGBTQ+ candidates, be open and inclusive to new ways of thinking and hold all your people to account."

LISA HEWITT
VIRTUAL 1

"The channel could be more diverse. Some companies consider unconscious bias and the wording and placement of their job adverts. Most want to hire the best person for the job, but often feel that the pool they have been presented with is not diverse enough and are not sure how to influence this. They could pass on their knowledge by spearheading mentoring schemes. They could encourage student placements and graduate schemes. They could come up with initiatives to reach out to groups not previously engaged, with role models minority groups can identify with. Flexible working, re-training schemes and a more balanced childcare system may also help. A new model of remote/hybrid, flexible working may present an opportunity for parents to combine childcare with their working life and open doors to new prospects which didn't exist before with the rigid office hours."

CHERIE HOWLETT
JOLA

"Diverse teams are more likely to introduce new product innovations than homogeneous teams. To attract and retain diverse talent, we need an inclusive channel which requires commitment in many areas. Homophily is the tendency to associate with similar others. Recruiting similar people means a lack of cognitive diversity - differences in perspective, insights, and thinking styles. In terms of psychological safety, the confidence to be different, to speak up with ideas, or admit mistakes, creates trust and means people thrive. It's important to practice what we portray. Following George Floyd's murder businesses released statements but failed to focus on inclusion. Many websites feature Pride Month logos, but do they welcome the LGBTQ+ community? And, with the average representation of people with disabilities among employees at around 3.2 per cent, compared to 18 per cent in the wider population, we must all ask ourselves: what can we do differently?"

KATE WOOD
CULTURE EXPERT

Motivated by purpose

Redsquid CEO Sohin Raithatha is on his way to defining a new work philosophy which frees itself from the strictures of traditional thinking and unleashes the power and relevancy of embracing a higher purpose.

A big question to ask is whether the current push for a Higher Purpose in corporate consciousness, which prioritises people, society and the environment above profit, will be fuelled by the rise of flexible working and the spotlight it has put on people and wellbeing? "Absolutely," stated Raithatha. "I truly believe that every single business will need to be purpose-driven to succeed going forward. Businesses like ours can no longer just be a provider of products. I continuously find that our customers are looking for long-term partnerships. Those partnerships are based on aligned values and a shared purpose.

"Our customers want to know that we take care of our employees and give them a working environment where they can thrive and take care of their mental health. Additionally, a commitment to the environment is creating greater value. That businesses need to take responsibility has become a vital factor in the modern world. Our purpose is what drives us as a business."

Non-financial factors now influence Redsquid in all areas, building on seven years of giving back to the community. "This year we have expanded our CSR efforts and taken a much bigger environmental focus," explained Raithatha. "In April we became a Carbon Neutral business and are continuing to improve our processes to cut down on our internal emissions. We are looking into everything we do to see where we can cut down, where we can be smarter, and what we can take completely out. The future is exciting and I'm pleased to see that more businesses are following to take a greater responsibility."

It is incumbent on all business leaders to rise to the occasion and make 'purpose' the foundation for almost all strategies, believes Raithatha. "We use our purpose to make a difference as a guideline for everything we do," he explained. "For us, this purpose is split three ways – to make a difference to our customers, to make a difference to our employees, and to make a difference to a small part of the world. Over the last year, when we were all working from home and our day to day lives changed overnight, we obviously had to rethink how we could continue to make a difference to our employees under new circumstances."

Raithatha displays a great enthusiasm for devotion to higher proposes and has created a new role – Head of People – to create a broader people strategy. "Our team and their wellbeing are such a priority for our business and with all the changes that have happened in

Sohin Raithatha

Every single business will need to be purpose-driven to succeed going forward

the last year we felt that it needed a role for itself," he stated. "We have also brought back our apprentice programme and welcomed several new apprentices into our team. They bring new energy and a new mindset into our organisation.

Fresh thinking
"At the same time, they force our existing team into a new way of thinking as they take on the role of trainers, to make sure they get the best possible training with us. The technology industry is changing rapidly and we must keep developing our skillset within the business to keep up. Over a third of our workforce is currently enrolled in training courses to make sure that we have the skills that we will need now and in the future."

What Raithatha's commitment to a purpose agenda means in practice has been on show for some time, having operated a flexible working policy for the last eight years, and always seen it as an important part of securing employees' wellbeing. "Being in our homes for so long has brought a new set of challenges which have given us a bigger focus on physical activity within the teams," commented Raithatha. "We have brought in a personal trainer to help our team members get started, and completely redesigned our office to create a work environment suited for this new world.

"By giving our team the ability to work flexibly they get room for creativity and a better work/life balance. We have a big focus on social interaction and keeping our team engaged. However, after a year of lockdown and working apart we have found the benefits of working side by side again. Nothing beats face to face when it comes to creative collaboration or creative problem solving. I have always found that I get my best ideas out of the office and cherish the flexibility to be able to do so."

It is true that Covid-19 has brought an increased focus on mental health and given the 'purpose agenda' a more widespread ideological coherence. "Although the pandemic has brought a lot of challenges, it has also given us an opportunity to rethink the way we work, the way we provide solutions for our customers and the way we choose to use our resources," stated Raithatha. "We can now choose to improve, to do better and continuously improve the way we work – I can't wait!" ∎

commsvision

THE NETWORK FOR ICT CHANNEL LEADERS

THE GLENEAGLES HOTEL

10TH, 11TH & 12TH NOVEMBER 2021

www.commsvision.com
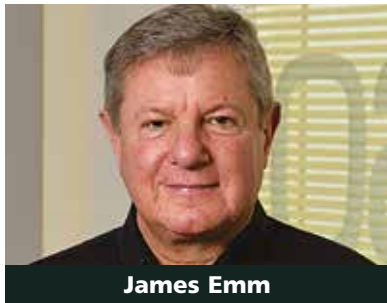
New channel chief

Andy Smethurst

GAMMA long-termer Andy Smethurst has taken the Channel Sales Director job, a newly created role. He joined Gamma in 2004 and prior to his promotion oversaw the growth of geographic sales teams. "The relationship Gamma has with its channel community is paramount to what we do and are all about," commented Smethurst. "We are all excited about the opportunities that lie ahead for the industry." Daryl Pile, Managing Director – Channel, added: "During his time at Gamma, Andy has built a successful track record of leading and nurturing teams and building strong relationships with our partners. He brings invaluable experience, knowledge and enthusiasm to the role."

Also on the move...

OAK Innovation's co-founder and Chairman James Emm is also acting as a Company Ambassador for PromptVoice, hoping to increase PromptVoice's customer base and raise awareness of professional audio as a value added proposition. "Oak's

James Emm

co-founder Philip Reynolds and I see this as something new and exciting, and with our sons and other staff running Oak so successfully I took on an ambassadorial role for PromptVoice. I was getting bored in semi-retirement!" PromptVoice CEO Anthony Buxton added: "James has an enviable depth of expertise and knowledge in the UK channel that is hard to rival. I'm flattered that he wants to work with us and help us engage with potential partners in the way he has done so successfully with Oak."

VIOLETTA Parylo has joined Waterland-backed Enreach as CFO with a remit to lead the billing and finance team into a new phase of growth. She joins from the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors where she worked for 11 years in senior roles. Her prior experience also includes stints in a variety of sectors ranging from private equity to technology and

Violetta Parylo

telecoms. Parylo said: "Enreach UK has ambitious plans for the rest of 2021 and beyond, and we are focused on expanding our UK offering." CEO Duncan Ward added: "Violetta is a driven leader with a relentless focus on doing things well, and is well suited to our growth, acquisition and transformational agenda."

BCN Group Sales and Marketing Director Rob Davies has stepped up to the Managing Director role – and with continuing responsibility for the Sales and Marketing teams he aims to double turnover by 2025. Davies joined BCN in early 2020 and witnessed the firm boost turnover by 13% to £27m. The company expects to hit £50m by 2025. CEO Simon Kelf said: "Rob has a track record of delivering results and his knowledge and understanding of the sector and the business will help to lead our next stage of growth."

BRIGHTSOLID has appointed ex-Six Degrees Marketing Director Alan Gardiner as CMO. He said: "The senior team's vision and plans are appealing and Brightsolid's relationship with AWS provides a springboard to support clients on their digital transformation journeys." CEO Elaine Maddison added: "Alan's appointment will provide a much needed link between our sales and product teams and the market to ensure that our message is heard loud and clear."

High flyer CFO lands at Daisy

FORMER aviation exec Neil Thompson has touched down at Daisy Group as CFO, taking over from Steve Smith who fills the new Corporate Development Director role and is working with the Group Board on strategy and acquisitions.

Neil Thompson

Thompson joins from Manchester Airport Group (MAG) where he was Group CFO working in a team that trebled earnings over a seven year period. He also oversaw the company's £1.5 billion acquisition of London Stansted. Prior roles include senior finance stints at MAN Group and Alstom.

Thompson said: "This is a dynamic sector with significant growth opportunities, and alongside Matthew Riley, ARES, Oakley Capital and everyone within the Group we can take Daisy to the next level."

Daisy Founder and Chairman Matthew Riley commented: "Neil brings a wealth of experience across both listed and private funded businesses, driving strong growth and shareholder value."

Hopper skips into GFT for UK top job

Carlton Hopper

IT SERVICES and software engineering firm GFT has appointed Carlton Hopper as UK Managing Director with a remit to spearhead regional expansion plans in the UK. He brings over 30 years of banking, technology and consulting experience and worked at Accenture, Barclays and Ernst & Young. Hopper joins GFT from IBM Global Business Services where he was the Partner for Banking responsible for IT strategy, digital delivery and IT resilience. Previously he was IBM's market development head for the UK financial services team and the European and UK blockchain lead. Hopper commented: "As client demand for our services grows apace, and inspired by the successful transition to remote working during the pandemic, one of my first projects is to launch a regional network of GFT capability. Watch this space."

FREE TO PERFORM

You need the right tools, products and knowledge to help you to grow your business. With support from 9, you can free up your time to focus on doing what you do best. We do our job, so you can be Free to Perform.

Get in touch with our Sales Director anna.roper@9group.co.uk to find out how 9 can help you achieve your ultimate potential.

9

FREE TO PERFORM

partners@9group.co.uk | 0800 068 5939 | 9group.co.uk