



How Onecom CEO enacts his lockdown lessons P12

Jeffrey on why Mdee is emerging as a serious force p14



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Comms People

This month's movers and shakers



TalkTalk boosted by Virtual1 deal

TalkTalk Group's ambition to scale up as a national provider of Ethernet solutions has been boosted by the acquisition of Virtual1. The combo hopes to achieve a combined EAD market share of 25%.

SPECIAL REPORT

The deal adds Virtual1's capabilities in automation, API and portals, all based on Software Defined Network services.

It is expected that the addition of increased scale and technological capabilities will significantly strengthen TalkTalk's Wholesale Platform offering.

TalkTalk CEO Tristia Harrison (pictured) stated: "Since taking the company private in February 2021 we have looked

to invest to strengthen our B2B and wholesale platforms.

"As businesses continue to experience increasing demands for high bandwidth services we see huge benefits in acquiring Virtual1, coupling our national scale network with its APIs and software capabilities."

Virtual1 CEO and founder Tom O'Hagan will lead the standalone business of 200 people as part of TalkTalk Group.

He added: "Fifteen years ago I sold my house and left my job

to start my own business. I'm immensely proud of what the business has achieved.

"Virtual1 has built a self-service portal and suite of APIs to enable businesses to virtually manage their networks with visibility of real-time bandwidth, reducing partners' manual intervention and cost, while improving the customer experience.

"We're now able to expand the reach of our solutions and increase our scale as a network provider with TalkTalk."

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EDITOR'S COMMENT



Stuart Gilroy

WILL the post-2025 network in the UK look much different from the one in 2024? Probably not. Will the legacy copper network be defunct post-2025? Definitely not. So when will the UK have a full digital infrastructure and when will the copper network be withdrawn? Who

knows. The only certainty is that the PSTN will be switched off at the end of 2025 and the industry needs to go all-digital before then. That's different from the full fibre roll out which often becomes entangled in the 2025 debate.

It is a fact that the copper network will be with us for some time to come. Openreach is not withdrawing copper in a rush and it expects to have a substantial copper network come 2026 – so digital services will run over copper as well as fibre. Even in stop-sell exchanges copper is unlikely to be phased out any time soon after the transition to fibre. So drawing parallels between 2025 and a proper Digital Britain is misleading, because much of the UK will be underpinned by copper.

It is also a fact that converting customers to full fibre is in some cases falling short of expectations (according to a recent Channel Forecast insight session). Getting the fibre into the ground is one thing, moving customers onto it is another.

Last month we reported that BT put the brakes on its Digital Voice home phone upgrade as it seeks to establish a more resilient roll out with improved back-up solutions when service is disrupted and faster power restoration, for example, following storm damage where calls can't be made on a broadband-only connection.

But the direction of travel is beyond doubt – and what is also clear is that the industry needs to work more closely together to accelerate full blown Digital Britain and all that it promises – and accept that copper will continue to show its mettle for longer than we expected despite the winds of change.

Stuart Gilroy, Editor

C+C swoops on Azzure IT



Peter Sweetbaum

CONTENT+Cloud's (C+C) Microsoft Dynamics practice has multiplied four-fold following its acquisition of Dynamics business Azzure IT.

The acquisition establishes Content+Cloud as one of the largest UK Microsoft Dynamics Business Central providers.

Content+Cloud was itself acquired by Advania in December 2021 enabling the Nordic IT services provider to establish a UK presence, adding to existing bases in Sweden, Iceland, Norway, Finland and Denmark.

"Dynamics has always been an important part of our capability but we have now fundamentally changed the scale at which we can deliver the Dynamics solution implementation, integration and IP development space," stated Content+Cloud CEO Peter Sweetbaum.

"Meeting the market demand for Dynamics related solutions is a challenge for all in this industry, including Microsoft.

"We look forward to working with Microsoft and others to identify ways to increase market capacity, meet client demand and create opportunities for younger professionals looking to make an impact.

"We are conscious of the resource and skills constraints in the UK, and also globally. With Advania and C+C's combined scale the ability to invest in up-and-coming talent, optimise ways of working to increase delivery capacity and invest in IP is exciting."

Including the Advania Dynamics practice across the Nordics, the combined group now has more than 225 experts able to deliver Dynamics 365.

NEWS ROUNDUP

UKCLOUD is pressing ahead with expansion plans following Government approval of its acquisition by Hadston 2, an investment firm led by UKCloud Chairman Jeff Thomas. "UKCloud is embracing a new strategic direction and will be making significant investments in its platform, services and people over the coming months," said CEO Simon Hansford.

CLOUD services provider Civo is formalising a four-day working week following a successful trial. "The experience of the last two years has changed how businesses think about the needs of employees forever," said CEO Mark Boost.

"Looking after employee welfare and mental health is no longer seen as a nice-to-have but a fundamental aspect of a successful business model." Ian Banks, a Site Reliability Engineer at Civo, added: "Having an extra day off helps to alleviate pressures from inside and outside work. I can spend more time with my kids, get on with chores that could previously take up a whole Saturday or go for a walk and decompress. I would not be surprised to see a reduced work week become the norm in the not-so-distant future." See page 22

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NEWS ROUNDUP

PRIME Networks has extended its national reach and strengthened its presence in the education sector with the acquisition of Farnham-based MSP TNSC. The deal follows Prime Networks' acquisition of G3 Solutions last year and is its fifth transaction following a reverse takeover of Modern Communications' IT division in 2013 and a debt funding package with Clydesdale Bank secured in 2018. MD Mark Simons said: "Our buy and build strategy is now gaining significant momentum. TNSC provides Prime with a foothold in the education sector and brings talented individuals to the group." Prime now employs over 65 staff across offices in London and the south east.

IT MANAGEMENT and security software firm Kaseya is to acquire security and cloud-based software solutions business Datto in a \$6.2bn deal backed by funding led by Insight Partners. "Kaseya's global customers can expect to see more functional, innovative and integrated solutions as a result of the purchase," said Kaseya CEO Fred Voccola. Datto CEO Tim Weller added: "Combining with Kaseya brings together a broader array of technology products to create additional opportunities for MSPs."

Big fund injection for CWSI

CWSI has ramped up its bid to become a leading pan-European provider of cloud and mobile security solutions, boosted by £17.5m in growth capital led by PE fund Castlegate Investments.

The Dublin headquartered company also completed its second acquisition in 12 months, Netherlands-based cyber security firm Bland, CWSI's first on mainland Europe.

"There is a strong overlap in our solution areas, value propositions and company cultures and both organisations have strong representation in the criminal justice and public health sectors," said CWSI co-founder and CEO Ronan Murphy. "Bringing the two business together creates one of the largest mobile security teams in Europe."

CWSI forecasts annualised revenues of over £16.5m with UK and European markets contributing 75%.



Ronan Murphy

MacRae hits green button on ESG plan

MAINTEL is refinancing an existing debt and driving ahead with ambitious ESG targets having secured a £26m Sustainability Linked Loan (SLL) from HSBC UK.

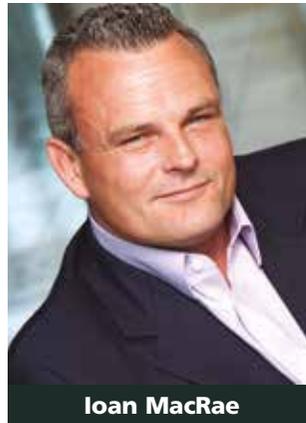
The funding agreement has ESG deliverables built in and Maintel is the first tech sector business to secure an SLL with HSBC UK.

The deal marks the development of what the bank sees as an emerging trend toward sustainable financing in the technology sector.

Maintel's ESG strategy aligns with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals and its initiatives range from lowering greenhouse gas emissions through operational efficiencies and cloud-based product offerings for customers, to planting a Maintel 'forest' and delivering social value improvements through national and community-based charity work.

Maintel CEO Ioan MacRae stated: "It's important that our partners and the decisions we take across the company contribute to society and the environment in a meaningful way.

"The SLL gives us an opportunity to invest in the right decisions for our business as a tech-



Ioan MacRae

nology company, while staying ambitious on our ESG journey."

Commenting on the financial deal, Roland Emmans, who is

the Head of Technology Sector at HSBC UK, said: "As the UK strives to hit environmental targets and consumers demand greater action from businesses to deliver positive societal impact, we expect that Maintel will be the first of many technology businesses to commit to ESG through embedding its finances into those strategies."

HSBC has committed to providing between \$750bn to \$1trn of sustainable financing and investment globally by 2025.

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Skipsey: Time to hand over



Andrew Skipsey

GIGANET founder Andrew Skipsey has stepped down one year after securing a £250m funding deal to build the firm's own full fibre network.

The company was established in 2003 and known as M12 Solutions. In 2012 Skipsey and his sons Matthew and Luke pivoted M12 from a voice-only comms firm to become a B2B and consumer ISP.

"Now is the time to hand over to the next generation who are evolving Giganet to become a challenger brand," said

Skipsey. "I will take valuable time out before deciding what my next venture might be."

Giganet CEO Jarlath Finnegan commented: "What Andrew and the original team achieved with M12 Solutions right through to obtaining the funding last April will enable us to drive Giganet forward."

Since April staff numbers rose from 25 to 146, with plans for circa 200 employees by 2023. Giganet also moved to a bigger HQ in Hampshire and opened a branch in Reading.

CCS aids suppliers on CRPs

ICT providers unable to prove their decarbonisation credentials risk missing out on lucrative Government contracts.

Suppliers bidding for major contracts need to commit to achieving Net Zero by 2050 and publish a Carbon Reduction Plan (CRP).

To help meet the required standard the Crown Commercial Service (CCS) is running webinars for suppliers on how to prepare a CRP in the format needed to bid for public sector contracts over £5m and frameworks.

The free-to-join sessions (May 19th, June 2nd and June 16th) provide an overview of Procurement Policy Notice 06/21, the basics of what is needed in a supplier's CRP and the template to be used.

Chair of the Cabinet Office Industry Working Group, Ian Fishwick (Adept Technology Group Chairman), said: "Since coming into effect, central Government contracts with a lifetime value of over £50bn have been applied under the new rules."

Connectus-KTSL merge to form group led by Shelton

CONNECTUS is set to boost its recurring managed services revenue and bid for larger opportunities through greater scale following its merger with KTSL to create Connectus Group led by CEO Roy Shelton.

"We have significantly increased our technical capability, boosted our delivery resources and deepened our pool of commercial experience," commented Shelton.

"This is our third transaction in as many years, having been forced to pause our merger and acquisition strategy due to the Covid-19 pandemic.



Roy Shelton

"Although that period presented challenges, it also threw up opportunities for forward thinking businesses like ours that can adapt quickly to the changing needs of our clients."

KTSL CTO Aaron Perrott added: "The merger extends our range of service solutions, and

the investment KTSL has made in our own intellectual property will provide clear differentiation for the Connectus group.

KTSL CEO Rob Marks becomes Non-Executive Chair of the group, which will continue to operate from five offices in Salford, Corsham, Egham, Daresbury and Dublin. Its HQ remains in Doncaster and expectations are that it will deliver £10m-plus revenues in the current financial year ending March 2023.

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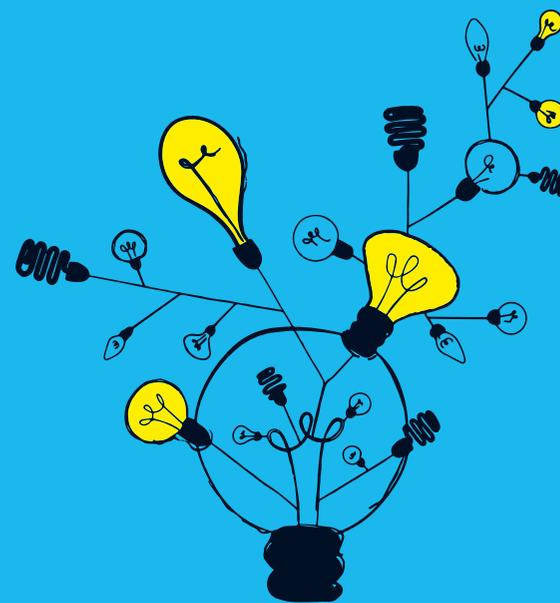
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ITS secures £100m fibre roll out fillip

WHOLESALE full fibre provider ITS Technology Group has secured a further £100m investment from current backer Aviva Investors as it seeks to accelerate the roll out of its full fibre network said to be on track to pass circa 25% of UK business premises by the end of this year.

ITS secured its first round of funding from Aviva Investors in early 2020 (£45m) – a deal that boosted ITS's indirect wholesale model giving more than 300 reseller, ISP and MSP partners access to Gigabit-capable connectivity, helping to triple ITS's revenues year-on-year.

"We have made significant progress over the last two years, building a skilled team, scalable delivery capabilities and creating a substantial full fibre footprint," commented ITS CEO Daren Baythorpe.

"This further commitment will enable ITS Technology Group to continue to roll out our open access wholesale digital infrastructure at pace, giving more businesses access to the connectivity solutions they need to underpin their operations."

Baythorpe says ITS can connect any UK business through its strategic partnerships with



Daren Baythorpe

key operators and using ITS's own networks.

Sean McLachlan, Senior Director, Infrastructure, Aviva Investors, commented: "There has been a huge structural shift in data usage in recent years which continues to accelerate, and the continued investment in digital connectivity is fundamental to supporting how

society functions today and tomorrow. ITS has made significant progress and outlined a clear vision to address this need. Combined with a strong team and expertise, we think this presents a compelling investment opportunity."

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Partners join up for litter pick

AGILITAS and IT services business Highgate marked Earth Day (April 22nd) with a joint litter pick at Broxtowe Country Park, Nottingham.

"Partnerships don't have to be confined to the office, and with sustainability high on the agenda for Agilitas and Highgate, Earth Day was an opportunity to get together in the great outdoors while supporting an initiative that is important to us both," said Helen Boggs, Marketing and Communications Manager, Agilitas.



Jenny Latimer, Alliances and Marketing Manager (and Sustainability Lead) at Highgate, said: "Working tog-

ether we are able to raise awareness and make a positive impact. It also strengthened business and personal relationships."

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NEWS ROUNDUP

EDINBURGH-based IT services provider RGB Solutions has been acquired by Livingston located Incovo. Chris Thomas, Incovo CEO, said: "Incovo has undergone considerable changes in the past 20 years. Demand for our IT services in particular has increased dramatically as a result of more sophisticated cyber security threats. By acquiring RGB Solutions we can begin another chapter in the Incovo story." The deal adds £700k revenues, five team members and 97 clients.

STONE Group's Stone 360 app has been credited with saving over half a million items of unwanted tech from landfill. The app helps organisations to arrange the responsible disposal of old or broken IT assets and has been downloaded by 11,000 UK firms. Craig Campion, Director of ITAD Sales, said: "More and more electronic waste is being created and recycling levels are not keeping pace. The Stone 360 app has helped our customers increase their recycling efforts by enabling quick and easy collections and responsible disposal of unwanted items." Stone is set to launch the second version of the app which will also help organisations to meet regulations on electronic waste disposal.

P2P scheme unites skills

A SCHEME introduced by Tech Data has enabled Bam Boom Cloud to leverage Adept's capabilities in the education market, and in return Adept will benefit from Bam Boom Cloud's Business Central skills.

The companies have come together under a new initiative called Partner to Partner (P2P). The programme brings together companies with complementary skills, enabling them to extend their propositions and access new markets. The team-up enables both parties to offer Microsoft Dynamics 365 Business Central solutions to education customers.

"The reality in today's IT market is that no single partner can do it all," stated Simon Bennett, Director for Enterprise Software and Cloud, Tech Data UK&I. "This is why Tech Data is investing in programmes and initiatives to bring partners that have complementary skills and access to markets together.

"Adept and Bam Boom Cloud have both embraced this concept with positivity and enthusiasm and shown how successful it can be."

According to Bennett this strategic link-up is 'just the start'. "We believe that, by cre-



Simon Bennett

ating a new ecosystem of talented and dynamic partners, we can enhance the value that the channel delivers to end user customers and support partners in developing and driving new revenue streams," he said.

Adept CCO Tom Scott commented: "Tech Data has multiple partners that are specialists in a specific domain. The P2P programme introduces me to those specialists."

Robert Pope, CCO of Bam Boom Cloud, added: "We are not specialists in education and that's how P2P plays well. It helps us to understand the sector and brings us all together."

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SysGroup moves on Scots firm

SYSGROUP'S influence in Scotland will be more strongly felt following its acquisition of Edinburgh headquartered Truststream Security Solutions in a deal worth up to £8m.

The transaction adds security expertise around threat analysis, detection and incident response.

"Truststream strongly complements our existing portfolio of services and has high levels of recurring revenue," said SysGroup CEO Adam Binks.

"In addition, cyber security remains a key priority for businesses of all sizes as threats become more prevalent and more harmful. Our end-to-end offering means that we can help companies navigate the evolving technological landscape and provide ongoing security, monitoring and support."

Truststream co-founder Paul Sullivan added: "We've experienced rapid growth over the last few years as organisations of all sizes and sectors demand cyber security solutions."

SysGroup has made a number of acquisitions including Certus IT for £8m in February 2019 and Hub Network Services for £1.45m in June 2019. The business also acquired Telford-based Rockford IT in 2018.

NEWS ROUNDUP

SECURITY firm ThreatLocker's market influence is set to strengthen following the securing of a \$100m funding boost. The investment (led by global growth equity firm General Atlantic) follows a year that saw ThreatLocker quadruple its revenue and workforce. Gary Reiner, Operating Partner at General Atlantic, said: "As companies of all sizes increasingly focus on filling gaps in their security stacks Zero Trust is becoming a necessity and we view ThreatLocker as an emerging leader in this paradigm shift."

EE HAS delivered its fastest 5G speeds to date following a link up with Qualcomm to boost network capacity, with real world speeds topping 1.7 Gbps. EE claims to be the first European network to deliver 5G over seven combined spectrum carriers. The new technology will be rolled out in major cities this year and supported by the next generation of smartphones. David Salam, who is the Director of Mobile at BT, commented: "By pooling our research expertise with Qualcomm Technologies we have been able to further enhance the EE network and will start to deliver some of Europe's fastest 5G speeds in our major cities."



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Spotlight on Windsor CEO

We put ten quickfire topical questions to Windsor Telecom CEO Pete Tomlinson. Here's what he fired from the hip...

Strategically, what did you learn from lockdown?

I used to love watching Challenge Anneka as a kid, seeing them build something that would normally take months or years, but in days. Lockdown taught us all that the same is possible in any business – that you can successfully deliver massive change, not in months or years, but literally in days.

In today's world, how would you define the new type of leader?

There isn't any such thing as traditional versus new leadership. After all, human nature hasn't changed. There is however good and bad leadership, and thankfully I do see that more and more business leaders are realising that being there for and with their teams really matters.

In what ways has the pandemic changed your thinking?

The pandemic hasn't changed our thinking or direction one bit. Everything that made sense before, about how people want to live and work or the importance of tech enabling that, just makes ten times more sense now.

What have been the main changes in your business over the past two years?

We've continued to build new products and grow our



Pete Tomlinson

team, our customers and our revenues in what is a great market. Now, coming out the other side of the pandemic, our business hasn't materially changed.

What are your current priorities?

Talent is at the heart of any successful business, so right now our top priority is growing our team with great people who share our values.

Have you found inspiration in some unexpected places during the past two years?

We saw some brilliant examples of businesses adapting to adversity and keep trading. I loved it when our local farm shop and café turned over their land to a huge outdoor area with bars, food vans and DJs so everyone could dance around their socially distanced picnic tables.

What trends in the market interest you most?

My passion has always been around making technology easy and enjoyable and I see more and more people, from

customers to the big tech vendors, taking that to heart which is awesome to see.

Following the pandemic, do you feel the Windsor Telecom team is better equipped to push towards the next level?

I do think the importance and profile of comms and tech during the pandemic has given a lot of the team a deeper appreciation of how the services we provide can change peoples' lives for the better, and enable them to enjoy work and life, which I see spurring them on.

Did your business grow during the pandemic?

We did keep growing during the pandemic, though there were clearly impacts on customer projects and the pace of change, so we weren't entirely immune to some of the trading pressures others have faced.

Are you a better director post-pandemic?

That's not for me to answer. For sure I learnt a lot, but life is always about learning. ■

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My lockdown lessons

The trauma of Covid-19 outbreaks and lockdowns required business leaders to react quickly and in many ways the pandemic has shaped executives into the leaders they are today. Here, Onecom CEO Martin Flick shares insights into his own experience and its impacts.

During the pandemic, business leaders were tasked with leading in a world not before seen in living memory. Urgent challenges were faced by organisations and their people, and all impacted the decisions and actions being made today. "We have come out stronger," stated Flick. "The key qualities needed for leadership were reaffirmed: Empathy, authenticity and the ability to make decisions decisively when required, but also to encourage those around you to think freely and contribute to the decision making processes. These qualities are the same as they ever were, but they are more acutely required now. During the pandemic we weren't dictatorial. We asked people what they thought and made decisions based on that insight. That's always been required of a good leader, but it was magnified by the pandemic, and it's something worth holding on to post-Covid.

"I also learned the importance of being able

to think quickly and with agility in an unpredictable and unfathomable scenario, execute decisions decisively and to prioritise the health and wellbeing of our workforce and our customers. In a scenario like the pandemic, people remember the way you act for a long time. We were able to lead by example. Another key lesson is to be appreciative of each other, to not take for granted the simple things in life like meeting your colleagues for coffee or lunch. At the same time we want to keep hold of the flexible and agile working practices that came to the fore."

The pandemic also brought into sharp focus what was most important to the business, and Flick enacted a number of initiatives quickly to support these imperatives. The first priority was the health, safety and mental wellbeing of its workforce. "This gave my leadership team a real sense of purpose to provide strong and clear guidance of our plans as an employer and reinforce a



Martin Flick

strong sense of belonging and team spirit," added Flick. "We wanted to galvanise our people and used a platform called Office Vibe which measures employee net promoter scores. The highest scores we've ever had

explained Flick. "As a result we launched Connect4Teams, a solution that enables us to integrate Microsoft Teams with a traditional telephony system. People could work from home in Teams and still receive inbound calls via their

I learned the importance of thinking quickly and with agility in an unpredictable and unfathomable scenario

were during the midst of the pandemic as a direct result of the measures we took."

Flick also split the leadership team into three battle groups. One focused on the health of the P&L and balance sheet, another on the needs and wellbeing of customers, especially because many businesses had to pivot quickly into a remote working model. The third battlegroup was asked to focus purely on futures. "Their job was to work with our strategic partners to develop our product set to resonate with customers over time,"

public phone numbers."

During the height of the Government restrictions Onecom won a number of large contracts without physically meeting the customer. "We engaged with them virtually, talked to them about their needs, designed the solution, went through the tendering process and negotiations, contracted with them and delivered the service virtually in the cloud across mobile, fixed and contact centre," commented Flick. "That confirmed to us that post-pandemic we can work in

a very different way to that which was conventional before. We found we could liberate our workforce to not be geographically hamstrung, automatically creating an improved work-life balance for our people."

It goes without saying that Onecom has ambitious growth plans. Its priority last year was around the significant M&A activity and integration of new elements into the business. There's still work to do on integration, noted Flick, and there will be further M&A, but the principle focus this year is to build on organic growth and strategic partnerships, bring together components of the business and fine tune them to drive penetration in key markets.

"It is clear that the pandemic has accelerated everybody's journey to the cloud," said Flick. "Businesses realise they need infrastructure that is adaptable, flexible and can evolve quickly. We've been seeing the shift to cloud for many years, but the past 12 months has seen a heightened desire to move at pace from traditional, sometimes legacy, telephony into the cloud. This will accelerate in line with the mandate to modernise connectivity UK wide by 2025.

"The companies that are going to thrive in the future will continue to take learnings from all that was good about such a terrible period. Like us, they will be continually evolving, adapting and learning from the past to make their teams more productive and to ensure their workforces enjoy doing what they do and are fully engaged." ■

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Jeffrey on Mdee's growth

Mdee Distribution is emerging as a serious force in the comms sector and according to Managing Director Tanny Jeffrey the company has surged into contention as a 'distributor of choice' for the full range of channel partners.

Mdee Distribution has solidified its position as a primary contender in the ICT distribution sector and Jeffrey puts an equal premium on both the company's pedigree and its ongoing evolution into new markets and technologies. The business began its commercial life in 1991 as a family firm set up to roll out an estate of mobile phone stores. Backed 35 per cent by Orange, this strategy evolved and Midland became a distributor in 1997. The company has since grown to have 30 staff and hundreds of partners across the UK. To facilitate growth it invested in infrastructure, particularly a bespoke IT platform, along with a focus on staff development including learning and development plans. "Investment in staff is an ongoing process and it's exciting and rewarding to reflect on how many people have been developed and promoted during the last few years," stated Jeffrey.

Mdee Distribution currently looks after circa 120,000 connections for over 18,000 customers, with about 250

active partners. Turnover is forecast to reach £26.5 million this year, targeting three per cent growth next year. And Jeffrey expects to reach over 50,000 new and upgraded connections for the second year running, spurred in part by BT's acquisition of EE which propelled Mdee Distribution to new heights. "BT sales continue to show significant growth with an increase of 16 per cent year-on-year," added Jeffrey. "The EE acquisition was significant as it opened up our portfolio of products and services to partners and gave us access to different parts of the market."

Product diversity

The acquisition also shows that product diversity should never be underestimated, because Jeffrey sees comms channel distribution evolving to drive multiple services into each customer, with more advanced and complex telecoms solutions involving security as well as traditional services. The technology areas on her radar screen include 5G, new BT products and services such as Cloud Voice Lite and SDWAN enhancements to



Tanny Jeffrey

It's exciting and rewarding to reflect on how many people have been developed and promoted over the last few years

MDM, expansion of bespoke offerings and more complex solutions, plus security. "Feedback from our partners makes me feel confident that we will continue to grow, to win new partners across a number of markets and deliver complex and well supported solutions with managed service contracts," stated Jeffrey.

Her biggest opportunity is to become the 'distributor of choice' for partners in both the mobile and non-mobile space, with onboarding and training programmes providing a springboard for partners. "We have simple levers and pulleys that drive more business and more partners, with each partner doing more business across

the portfolio of products and services," stated Jeffrey. "We've seen a lift in non-traditional solutions-based resellers which has allowed us to penetrate new vertical markets, increasing our revenues.

"Our systems mean that non-mobile partners can do as much or as little as they

n strategy

wish in terms of quoting and processing deals, so they can choose to have total control or take a 'we sell, you do the rest' approach, using us as back office to support their sales function. The team works with partners and the network to create customer solutions and bespoke propositions. We don't issue targets and spurious contracts with punitive terms. By working side by side with our partners we are already seeing an increase in business opportunities across EE and BT, often with joint solutions."

Other factors influencing the evolution of Mdee

Many partners new to mobile have taken off with us during the last year

Distribution include an increase in larger partners taking over smaller ones; more productive working; demand and support from the networks; and a wider mix of partners from different markets. "Many partners new to mobile have taken off with us over the last year and this will continue as the channel evolves in a trusted advisor capacity, with a focus on solution selling and managed services as opposed to price and one-off transactions," said Jeffrey. "Customers are increasingly looking at managed services and want advice on security. A fully unified service from a one bill service provider will become more significant."

Jeffrey described the comms channel as 'an ever changing environment in which some things just don't change at

all'. This observation extends to business relationships. "I've worked in the channel for years and a lot of the partners I work with have become friends, which is an absolute pleasure," she said.

Dynamic sector

Jeffrey 'fell' into the comms sector while temping and enjoyed the dynamic culture. She's been in the industry for over 30 years now, starting off as a marketeer in 1989 for a company that was bought by Hutchison Telecom and eventually became Orange. "The industry was very different then," commented Jeffrey. "Mobile phones were emerging and

it was exciting to be part of that transformation. I eventually ran the channel marketing for dealers and distribution before moving

to help grow one of my customers. They were acquired by Avenir Telecom in 2000 and I enjoyed being part of a European group and continuing to grow the business. My next move was to run Brightstar UK. I left to set up my own consultancy and then was asked by one of my clients to do a turnaround and then run Mdee.

"Working your way up in a company is always rewarding and a lot is learned along the way. Understanding individual functions from everyone's perspectives has helped to keep me balanced and fair when I'm running the teams, as well as enabling me to understand each role and how they work. I've also learnt to be direct, not beat around the bush and always be confident."

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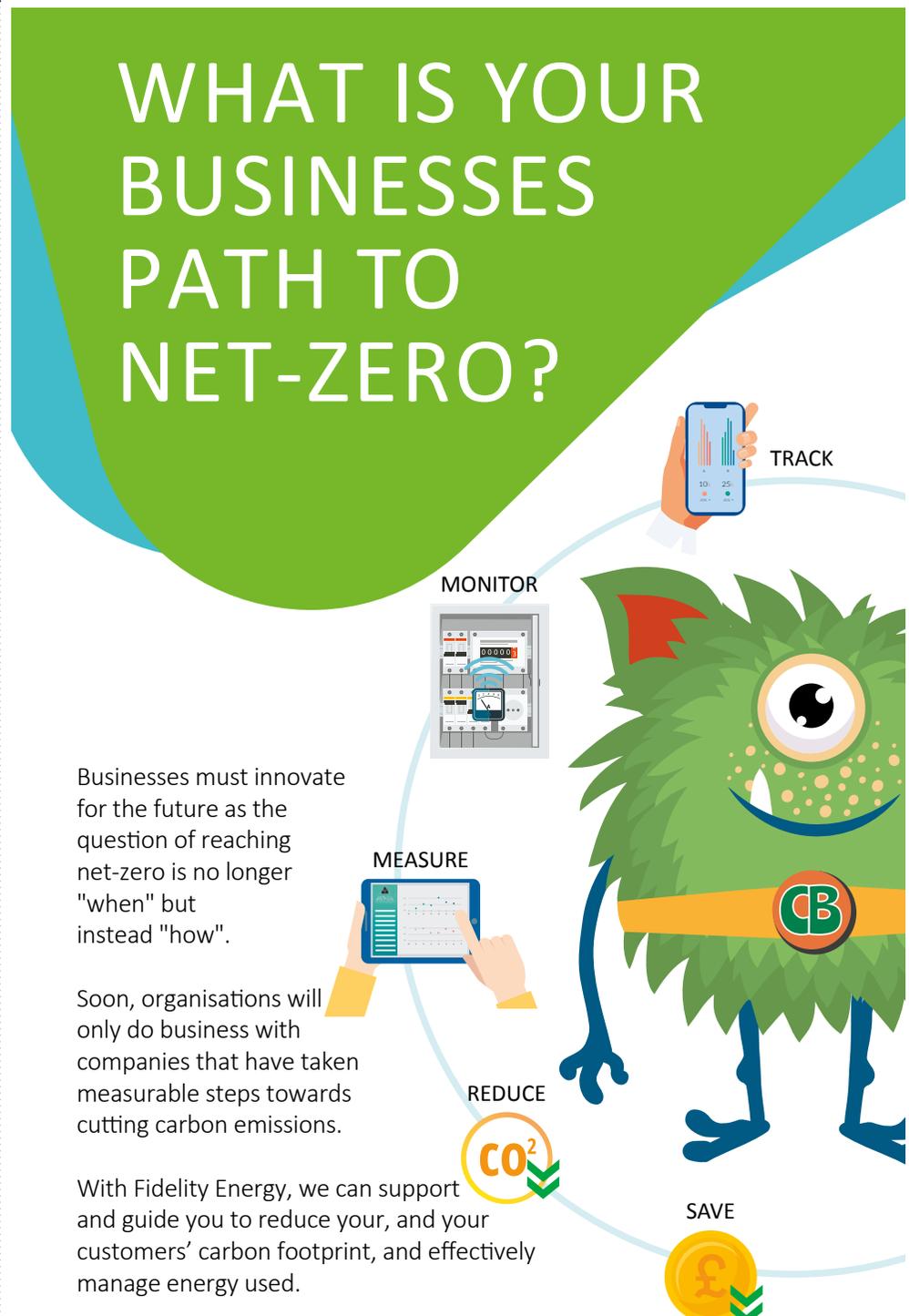
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The critical components

Here, Mitel VP International Richard Roberts takes a retrospective, current and prospective view of business leadership in times of revolutionary change, and shares insights into how the evolution of responsible leadership models, driven in large part by Covid-19, has impacted his approach.

From Roberts' standpoint, gone are the days when some leaders were unapproachable, cold, quick to scold and slow to reward. "We now understand that this traditional leadership model is in fact detrimental, not only to employees' wellbeing, but business itself," he stated. "Particularly, I have become even more interested in how people think and behave on a psychological level to see how I can adapt this to my leadership style. I truly believe that management techniques are evolving and that what worked five years ago, or even two years ago, is no longer applicable. Learning these new methods is inspiring, and it gives me a clarity of thought that I'm able to bring into my work.

"For example, many people in the office now take five minutes every now and then just to listen to a song, or read part of their book. This is something that we've all been taught, from early on in our careers, not to do. But

now we're understanding the value of these short periods of reflection and relaxation during the day, especially after longer periods of intense work and concentration. If leaders can help their teams to secure these times of sanctuary during the day, they can make their businesses more productive and their team members happier."

Roberts believes that the workplace is changing along with evolving mindsets. Therefore, leadership approaches within our industry must reflect the changes people are trying to realise in the wider world. "Leaders must become more inclusive and genuinely listen to their co-workers," he commented. "More to the point, and specifically in the era of hybrid working, leaders have to be able to foster a positive workplace culture.

"With many of us working from home for the majority of the week, culture has become a new frontier for business success, and one



Richard Roberts

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, I have become more eager to invest in my own knowledge and skills. Not just because I had the time to do so, but because it became obvious that it was necessary

that can only be conquered through the seamless integration of digital technologies that facilitate seamless hybrid working and a work culture that is truly inclusive for everyone."

Hybrid workplaces

The pandemic accelerated the rate at which businesses shifted to a hybrid working model, supporting Mitel's strategic trajectory towards hybrid UC. "The pandemic showed us that hybrid workplaces are here to stay

and solidified our ambition to provide an elevated working experience in the digital age," added Roberts. "This is all well known by now. What people aren't discussing is the increased pressure and relevance that the pandemic brought upon communication and collaboration in the workplace, enabling these capabilities to become the reasons for which an organisation sinks or swims."

The Covid-19 pandemic compelled Mitel to reimagine

and adapt its business to new and changing circumstances. One of the most crucial developments was bolstering its cloud and subscription offering. "With a majority of employees now working from home for at least one day per week, businesses are seeking ever more flexible and innovative solutions," commented Roberts. "We are focusing on building shared working environments that encourage people to collaborate, be open and connect with each other."

of modern leadership

Another lesson Roberts has learned from lockdown is that it would be wrong to assume that people are engaged by simply being in the office. When working from home, productivity can no longer be measured by whoever arrives the earliest or leaves the latest, it is now about who you are and what you achieve.

Key learnings

"The new prioritisation of contribution over attendance has fundamentally changed the way businesses operate," said Roberts. "Due to the pandemic, I have become more eager to invest in my own knowledge and skills. Not just because I had the time to do so, but because it became obvious that it was necessary. This was rewarding, as we often arrive at an age where we think we know enough, when the reality is that we can never know enough. The learning process continues, no matter your age or at what stage of your career you find yourself in.

"Another priority is to further create clarity.

This encompasses as much personal clarity as organisational clarity. Without it, complacency sets in and productivity suffers. To execute your goals and make your vision come to life, it is crucial that you approach your short and long-term goals with clarity and drive. Especially while emerging out of a pandemic, setting a direction and working towards a destination has become more important than ever."

Roberts believes that leading is now geared towards 'servant-leadership'. He says a leader's ability to provide a positive environment for their team is more important now than ever in the past. "The pandemic has shown us how easy it is for people to reassess their working environments and move," commented Roberts. "The great resignation is very real, and it has become clear that people don't leave companies, they leave managers. It's vital that leaders become more tolerant and understand that their colleagues lead their own full lives away from work. So,

unless you have the ability to connect well with your team, your best talent is put at risk.

"I've learned since the pandemic to become calmer and less demanding as a result of deepening my understanding of the various competing priorities that each individual has, both at work and at home. Fostering this kind of environment is infinitely more productive for businesses because just 30 minutes of true passion and inspiration from a team member will always be more valuable than an entire day of disengaged interaction."

Employee engagement

As the pandemic reset major work trends, leaders needed to rethink workforce, performance and the employee experience. Businesses have now understood that they need to look beyond someone's role and job title, and make it a priority to engage their employees, help them feel supported and create a sense of belonging. "Only by creating a more human, honest and compassionate workplace will they be able

to hold onto talent in the long-term," added Roberts.

In this context, the most prominent trend we are witnessing in the UC market is the transition of workforces towards a hybrid model in which employees are able to seamlessly work from their offices, their own homes and, building on this, anywhere in the world. "Businesses should be aiming to create shared digital workspaces where people want to congregate and come together, at least for part of their working weeks," said Roberts.

"In this way, we see the re-emergence of a historic technological challenge – building a tool that people feel they own and control, rather than a tool that has been imposed upon them."

Videoconferencing, for example, used to be a harrowing experience for some people. They didn't like to see themselves on camera and felt that they couldn't be their authentic selves in that environment. "But now, through the application of AI, we'll be able to provide services that make people

feel more comfortable and can help increase productivity," stated Roberts. "For example, people can currently blur their backgrounds, but soon they'll be able to have high quality real-time transcriptions and translations too, enabling different cultures and languages to all come together collaboratively."

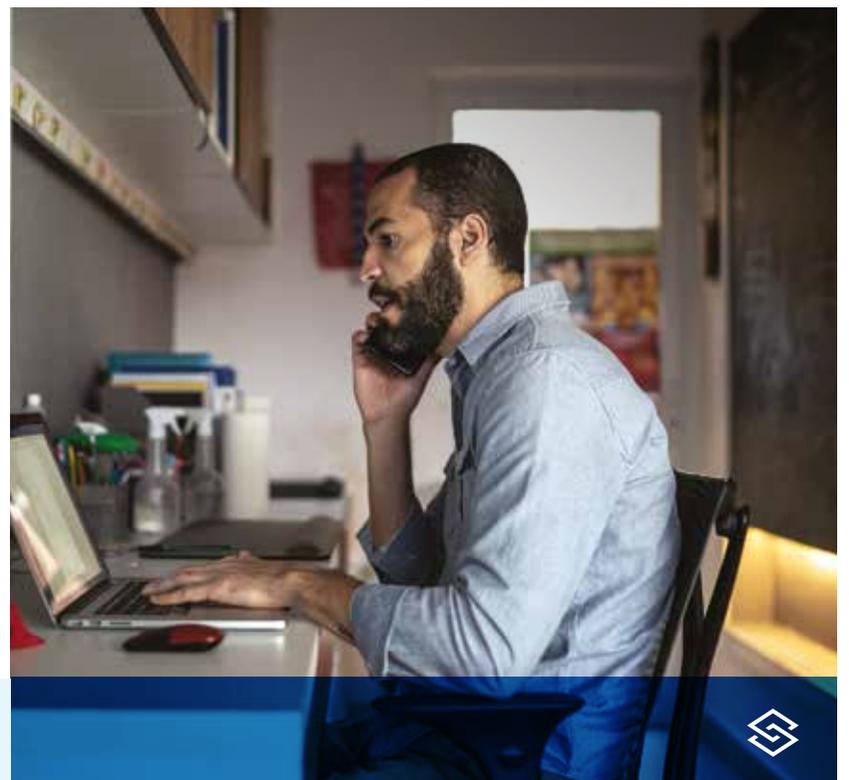
As well as being inspired by such innovations, Roberts has also been inspired by some of Mitel's leaders who came up with new ways to interact with their teams amidst the global pandemic. "I have also found inspiration in simplicity," he added. "Being confined to my own home has allowed me to reconnect with my love for nature, and changing up the structure and pace of my usual working day has been liberating. For example, I introduced walking meetings to my schedule and enjoyed a sense of calm when taking some of my meetings while on a walk in the forest. It was great to be able to experience first-hand that you can give more of yourself when you are absolutely at ease." ■



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Lifting the lid on Physical

As the UK fibre rollout gathers pace, NextGenAccess can access hidden network assets to provide carriers, data centre operators, service providers, networks and public sector organisations with compelling and highly flexible alternatives to lit fibre services. Here, Sales Director Steve Mackervoy explains how a partnership with NextGenAccess can help channel players provide valuable Physical Infrastructure Access (PIA) to customers

Please outline the development plans NextGenAccess has been working on in the last year/18 months?

Our key focus has been deploying large scale fibre networks in Manchester, London and Essex. These builds take us to 450km of network, and we have been building with the future in mind. We always construct with strategically placed joints and chambers to allow us to easily extend our network to deliver our access products to partners wishing to provide services to their business customers.

Would you say NextGenAccess intends to be a market disruptor?

Yes, but only where the market needs disrupting. The access market is dominated by a single player and the options for partners are limited. Our aim is to provide partners with an alternative, giving them better commercials, higher bandwidths, and the opportunity to create differentiating solutions for their customers.

How important to your plans is it to have experienced connectivity specialists in the NextGenAccess management team?

This for us has been crucial. Totting up the industry experience of the management team alone, we are talking in excess of 100 years. For example, having former Gamma CEO Bob Falconer as a non-executive director gives us the know-how, and access to contacts



Steve Mackervoy

The opportunity presented by being radical is so big that it's in everyone's best interests, including our customers, to overcome any obstacles.

to really make things happen.

What hurdles have you overcome to be in a

position to take your offerings to market?

It is always difficult doing something genuinely new.

Sometimes it is easier to copy the offerings of one's competitors, but in this case the opportunity presented by being radical is so big that it's in everyone's best interests, including our customers, to overcome any obstacles.

What are those key offerings and what are your key channel targets?

Our key offerings are point to point access Dark Fibre services in city centres, where our channel targets have 'unbundled', and managed end to end layer 2 services where they haven't.

Please outline PIA and what benefits it brings to channel players?

PIA (Physical Infrastructure Access) is the methodology whereby Openreach allows other operators access to its duct network to deploy their own fibres. This means that operators such as NGA can deploy quicker and at less cost with less disruption for local businesses and residents. This means that channel partners get more choice and pay less for the services their customers need.

Would you say NGA is leading the way in PIA and, if so, how?

NGA has been working with PIA since it was launched, and was one of the first operators to achieve, and maintain, Path To Collaboration status nationally. This essentially means that we are a trusted partner of Openreach and they allow us to fix blockages and problems in their network

without waiting for authorisation, so yes, I would say that NGA is leading the way with PIA.

What are the main customer targets for PIA?

Consumers of Openreach access services who want something different.

What innovations and support does NGA provide to any channel player considering adding PIA to their portfolio?

We offer enhanced, flexible commercials and the ability to take ownership of some infrastructure if our partners require it.

What are your aims and objectives for the next year?

Our aim is to take a share of the leased line market in our chosen areas. We want to shake up the market by offering a differentiated product set to CPs, ISPs and MNOs and to develop a small but focussed channel partner base which can take our products and add to them to take to a wider audience, bringing cheaper connectivity to businesses in key areas

Please describe in a short sentence why a channel player should get in touch with you.

NGA is a wholesale only business and has a wealth of experience in an area of telecoms that some have discovered can be a minefield. Our team comprises individuals who previously operated successful channel partner businesses. We know what good looks like.

Infrastructure Access (PIA)

A background to NGA

Managing Director Mark Weller describes NextGenAccess as a carrier neutral, managed fibre infrastructure service provider.

"We design, plan, install and maintain new dark fibre routes that become integral to our customers' core and access networks," he explained.

"We operate in a highly sustainable way and always look to re-use existing infrastructure assets in preference to building new ones. Our Openreach PIA licence gives us the right to deploy fibre and sub-duct anywhere within the UK's most extensive network of ducts and poles. Our re-use approach is not only environmentally friendly, but is also far less disruptive, costly and time consuming than building from scratch.

"We have been working with Openreach and deploying fibre within their infrastructure since 2015. We started by building out extensions to carrier networks for some of the tier 1 carriers



Mark Weller

We operate in a highly sustainable way and always look to re-use existing infrastructure

and more recently constructed a large (230km) network in South Essex with the anchor tenant being the combined local authorities in the area. We have also undertaken strategic

builds such as connecting the Vantage CWL-1 Data Centre (formerly NGD) in Newport, South Wales to Bristol via the M48 bridge over the River Severn.

"All this has created a network of 450km and a platform for us to do what we have always wanted to do which is to build access networks and give our customers a Dark Fibre alternative to Openreach EAD services, thereby de-coupling cost from capacity. It means our customers can buy Dark Fibre from us and then be in total control of the speed of service they offer to their customers. This will allow our customers to steal a march on the market by offering competitive 10G access products but only pay for the access fibre at a single rate, whether it be for a 1G or 10G service.

As a 'wholesale only' business, NextGenAccess sees this development as key to driving growth and maintaining reseller margins in the future," concluded Weller.

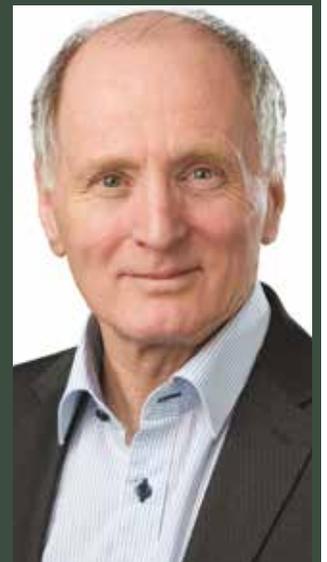
Falconer's targets

Channel champion Bob Falconer, now a Non-Executive director at NextGenAccess, is aware the company's offering won't be for everyone in the channel.

"Our prospective customers will need a high degree of technical capability to light the dark fibre we're offering in dense urban areas and layer 2 services in more rural locations where we already have a presence," he said.

"Also, in the key exchanges in big cities they will need a presence to deploy their electronics. They may already have this in place together with the backhaul to the internet or it may be an aspiration of theirs. Our more likely targets are 'super-resellers' or aggregators where NGA can sit in the background.

"Our channel-only approach means that you won't be competing with us for your customer's attention. We just want to connect you up and support you going forward.



Bob Falconer

"We have a presence in 10 exchanges at the moment and plans to connect 15 over the next 12 months. Contact us to see if the areas we have built or are planning to build are of interest to you and we are also keen on a more collaborative approach, where we build a bespoke network together to connect your existing and prospective customers."

PIA is not a dark art

Or is it? It is a highly regulated area and this is not surprising. After all, Openreach is allowing NextGenAccess to get into the inner workings of their network to deploy its equipment.

As Steve Mackervoy stressed: "This comes with a huge responsibility as you may have other

customers connected to that same network and nobody in telecoms likes downtime! So, the key for us is to behave responsibly.

"We have achieved the coveted 'Path To Collaboration' status meaning we have proven to be a trusted partner of Openreach across the UK. Simply put, this enables

NGA to fix blockages when we find them without going back to Openreach for permission or a budget.

"We are not sitting back on our laurels; our teams have huge experience, and we are all focussed on retaining this ability to deploy on time and on budget," added Mackervoy.



CityFibre's open policy

Network giant CityFibre is making big full fibre footprints north of the border and was keen to discuss emerging opportunities with its leading Scottish partners at its inaugural Regional Partner event staged in Edinburgh last month.

Describing its £4 billion full fibre infrastructure investment journey, CityFibre's channel team was keen to show its Scottish City Champions, Regional and Launch Partners that honesty, friendship and collaboration is vital to achieving mutual success. In this context, Head of Wholesale Andy Wilson gave a candid answer when questioned on pricing and channel competition: "I've been working with the product team, looking at our prices within the landscape, including altnets, regionally and nationally. The market has moved at a pace. Openreach have done their pricing review and Virgin have followed suit. We've done some promos, but, when we did the analysis, we saw we were behind on fractional bandwidth. There were variances up to a gig; Ethernet Flex was a good example."

Within a couple of weeks of the event, CityFibre announced changes to its Ethernet pricing it claims have been welcomed by partners. Wilson added: "When I took over the channel business

three years ago, I wanted to create an environment in which partners had a regional programme that would give them the advantages of direct support, or to simply work with our aggregator partners. In other words, to give them choice. Our regional programme has proven itself and we work closely with our regionally focused partners, supporting their sales and marketing activity to help them maximise the opportunity."

Telecoms analyst Cartesian also played an important part of the conference agenda. In his market trends presentation, Simon Evans, Principal Consultant said that Scotland is slightly ahead of the curve compared to the rest of the UK in terms of city gigabit coverage due to the timing of data over cable service upgrades and that it continues to track well in urban full fibre coverage.

However, Bruce Strang, COO at Commsworld, was anxious to know if CityFibre would withdraw from Scotland once its programme to fibre up Aberdeen, Glasgow, Dundee, Inverness and Edinburgh is



Andy Wilson

We've recently undertaken a review of our Ethernet pricing and made some exciting changes to reflect the competitive nature of the market which gives our partners more margin opportunity

complete alongside Stirling, which is now a full fibre city. Wilson said: "We're currently hyper-focused on delivering our eight million home roll out plan to 285 locations right across the UK – including 18 locations in Scotland. Building to this target and walking away isn't what we're about though. CityFibre is a growing company with a robust long-term plan and a founding mission to drive transformational change right across the UK.

"Ultimately this means we'll always look for ways to

extend the reach and benefits of our full fibre infrastructure. We are however concerned that the timetable for the Project Gigabit full fibre roll out in rural Scotland is lagging behind that of England. We urge the Scottish Government to accelerate this process in order to make best use of the momentum of the extensive commercial roll outs currently underway."

In his roadmap presentation, Head of Business Products Paul Heritage Redpath provided details about CityFibre's modern fibre

exchanges, which are not much larger than a shipping container yet provide state of the art security and reliable power. "Each of these now sit at the heart of every network we build and are capable of serving gigabit speeds to 40-60,000 premises," he said.

By encouraging open and honest dialogue with its partners CityFibre seems intent on staying on top of channel concerns and Comms Dealer will keep readers updated on other scheduled regional events in the months ahead. ■

Harnessing hyper change

CEO Will Morey and Commercial Director Tim Brooks took centre stage at Pragma's Hyper Evolution Partner conference held at Brighton's Grand Hotel last month.

On the back of the acquisition of IT distributor Techland, a growing partner base and the successful launch of white label digital services business Candio, the duo are leading Pragma and its resellers into a raft of new 'as-a-service' opportunities, which was the central theme of the conference which returned last month after a two-year hiatus caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

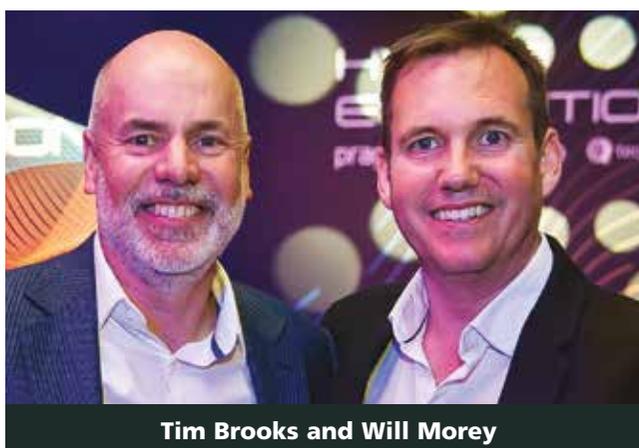
"It's so great to be back doing what we do best," said Morey. "There are headaches, heartaches, tears and pain putting on an event like this, but when you walk back into the room and see people you haven't seen for two years, it couldn't get any better."

Brooks added: "A lot of businesses are more transactional than we

are. And the requirement for these types of events is not so great. But for us, our business is built on relationships with our partners and not being able to see them and celebrate with them has been hard. It's the relationship and the community that we're passionate about."

Morey recalled: "We started as a distribution company but always knew we would transform into a cloud business. We had to learn what as-a-service business models meant, plus subscriptions, billing, data centres and virtualised infrastructure. Now, 75 per cent plus of our businesses is in these arenas, which is fantastic."

As CEO, Morey now heads up the new three tier Pragma, Candio and Techland infrastructure under the



Tim Brooks and Will Morey

EnableX umbrella brand. Leading the group alongside him is new CFO Dean Mayer who was regrettably absent from the conference due to a Covid diagnosis the day before. "Our message at the conference was 'hyper evolution' which I guess people could say is just a sexy and techie tag line, but it isn't," stressed Morey.

"We think that people have gone through a hyper

evolution in the last two years. And we've all had to adapt our businesses as quickly as possible. We wanted to demonstrate that we've adapted and evolved our business with EnableX to have the scale, resources and capability our partners need. And we've adapted each of our individual businesses to make sure that they're driving recurring revenue. And they're channel focused as they always have been."

Brooks, who will remain active in the growth of the organisation as Commercial Director, commented: "Candio has been revolutionary for our business and for a lot of our resellers, who were looking to increase their billing revenue and add value to their customers. Now, with Techland in the group, we're talking about things like Session Border Controllers As-a-Service which brings even more opportunity and potential for resellers to serve a wider audience.

"On a personal level I'm pleased to be staying on in the business and I'm proud of Will for taking the reins and driving the company forward."

Focus Group were named Reseller of the Year at the Pragma awards staged at the conference. ■

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TECHNOLOGIES

Highgate IT trail blazes for

It's wrong to limit anyone's right to choose how and where they work, according to Highgate IT Solutions Sales Director Bob Sahota, who calls for the widespread adoption of a more generous work-life balance.

Highgate IT Solutions kicked off the trial of a four-day working week during the business quarter starting 1st April 2022. The London-based company has adopted the 100:80:100 model which means it will commit to 100 per cent pay for 80 per cent of the time in return for 100 per cent productivity. "I strongly believe that a four-day week that consists of 28 hours will improve all of our lives," said Sahota. "If I could transform any area of the ICT industry it would be the way we work, specifically how we balance our work and life. We implemented a four-day week so our employees can get some of their time back to do things that are important to them in their lives. I often tell our employees and even candidates that work is not the most important aspect of life, it is just a part of it and can contribute to the life that we want to live.

"I see and talk to people across many industries who are stressed, anxious and depressed and quite often it is their work and their employers that contribute to this state.

Life can be short and our time is precious. I would love to see our industry, and beyond, start taking better care of themselves, prioritising employee wellbeing and mental health, to give everyone a chance to live their best life."

Sahota believes that Highgate's people-first approach goes a long way to meet one of the business world's new challenges – the post-pandemic era of demand for remote working where possible. "Remote and hybrid working is everywhere now and employees want the flexibility to work from anywhere, not just the office," said Sahota. "They also want flexibility in how their working day looks. But there is some nervousness across the channel in allowing this to happen. I hear lots of arguments from employers in favour of working from an office quoting water cooler moments, collaborative working, the buzz of an office and lots more. But often that is based on what they want as employers, not necessarily what their employees want. Ultimately, business leaders have an



Bob Sahota

Life can be short and time is precious. I would love to see our industry, and beyond, start taking better care of themselves, prioritising employee wellbeing and mental health, to give everyone a chance to live their best life

opportunity to be open-minded, listen to their employees and shape a workplace fit for the future."

Hybrid working

With a huge increase in remote and hybrid working, many organisations still do not have a fit for purpose telephony or UC solution, so Highgate is having many conversations in this space. "Another area of interest is resources," added Sahota. "Our clients tell us that they often find themselves under-resourced or lacking the technical skills to deliver a project within their ideal timeframe, so we are seeing a lot of traction in

providing expert resources for specific projects."

According to Sahota, Highgate deploys a 'simple' three pronged growth strategy, not built on revenue, profit, calls or any other KPI or metric. Nor is it reliant on a particular technology, vendor, partner, solution or service. "First, it is to continue bringing people into the organisation who demonstrate the same stoic character traits that we hold so dear, and who share the same values and ethics as us," explained Sahota. "Secondly, we continue building meaningful relationships with our clients,

vendors and partners. And thirdly, for us to keep finding ways to improve the lives of our employees and help them to become the best version of themselves. If we focus on this three-way strategy the rest will take care of itself."

It's a policy that has served the company well since it began its commercial life in 2010, established by Stuart Marginson. He worked in the IT channel as an account manager but felt things could be done differently and better – particularly around working from anywhere rather than being tied to a desk in a fixed location, and valuing employees as people,

our-day week

not just numbers. From these two core principles Highgate was born, and people who saw the value of working in this way reached out to Marginson to become part of the organisation. "For them, working for a 100 per cent remote organisation added immense value," said Sahota. "They also wanted to work somewhere they felt valued and respected. This was where Highgate's organic growth came from and to this day we continue to work by these principles and recruit in the same way."

To help build his business Marginson contacted Sahota in early 2021. They have been close friends for the best part of 20 years. The company was in its 11th year of trading, had 10 people in sales and turned over £10 million the previous year. Marginson wanted to know if Sahota would be interested in working with him to get the firm to the next level, well aware of his career history and matching workplace cultural ethos. As a 16-year-old selling door-to-door in a 100 per cent commission-only role, Sahota got his first glimpse of what a life in sales could entail – hard work and high reward. He was first exposed to the IT channel after an open day held by Simply Computers. That was 21 years ago, and he went on to hold various leadership and management roles.

"Immediately there was synergy between us," said Sahota. "We shared identical values and ethics, the vision and ambition excited me and the opportunity to continue building a business that did things the right way was perfect for me at that stage of my life and career. We started by formalising our

company principles, by asking ourselves who we are now, what we want to be, and most importantly, why we are doing it. Once we had a strong enough 'why', we then moved onto the 'how'."

By the end of June 2022 Highgate's employee headcount will reach 21, more than doubling in less than a year. The business achieved £11 million in 2021 and projected revenue for 2022 is £15 million. It has over 1,500 active clients split evenly between private and public sector. "In the private sector our sweet spot is broad, 250 to 2,000-plus users across finance, manufacturing, media, legal, insurance, gaming and construction," said Sahota. "Most of our public sector activity is within education where safeguarding children remains a number one priority. Schools are leaning on us, asking us how to create or strengthen their digital safeguarding strategy. We provide their staff, students, governors and parents with safeguarding advice, guidance and consultancy in addition to the technology, so they can have a complete solution."

Despite the breadth of its services Highgate keeps everything simple, being mindful not to overcomplicate matters. "We listen to what is happening in the wider market so we can easily identify current trends and move with them," he added. "If we can deeply understand what is important to our clients, what they are struggling with, what their pain points are, what keeps them up at night, then we can start to understand what type of partner we need to be for them." ■

Just a minute with Bob Sahota...

Role model: Thich Nhat Hanh: He made the world a better place.

Your biggest fear? The future, for future generations.

Best advice you have been given? Stop trying to control things you have no control over.

What talent do you wish you had: To read faster.

In hindsight: I would not change a single thing, not just in business, but in my life. I believe everything happened the way it was meant to, and it all led to this moment right now.

Tell us something about yourself we don't know: After living in London my entire life, my partner and I are relocating to the Highlands this summer.

Biggest career achievement: Building the London city office from scratch for Total Computers. In two years we went from zero to contributing £20 million-plus. But the achievement was the fact that we created one of the most connected, driven, committed and family-like teams I have ever been a part of.

One example of something you have overcome: Alcoholism.

Three ideal dinner guests: Buddha, Thich Nhat Hanh and Eckart Tolle. We would all discuss the meaning of life, enlightenment and the path to peace and happiness.

Your main strength and what could you work on? My greatest strength is also my biggest weakness, and that would be my mind.

Name one thing you could not do without in your job: Spotify's classical playlists.

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

Top tip for resellers: Evolve.

"The user's going to pick dancing pigs over security every time"

Bruce Schneier

Bruce is an American, and we shouldn't hold that against him. He's also one of the smartest writers and engaging speakers about computers, security, privacy, technology, and encryption etc I've ever come across. Much to my dismay he is also quoted with the following adage "If you think technology can solve your security problems, then you don't understand the problems and you don't understand the technology". This last saying rather marries with my own discussions about IT security in my various day jobs. Whether I am speaking to a corporate lawyer who's in tech, a business owner, a journalist, or fellow TMT industry colleague we nearly always agree that the worst people to talk to about IT Security are techies, that the subject is serious and important and that sadly all too often we don't really know who to trust!

Dear reader, does this strike a chord? If so, for the purposes of this column and your valuable time let us flip this around and see whether we can turn the negatives into opportunity. After all you murmur, isn't that what they pay me the big bucks for? So, how many of us expect customers to differentiate between say Microsoft, Sophos, AVG, Mimecast,

Barracuda (the list goes on). The answer is they don't do they? Customers, existing or new buy from people like us, their local trusted ICT support provider. Its that simple. And that's why you will want to contact me after you've finished this column and yes you can comment on my writing as well!

Why you ask? Well, I know I, and many of you, be you a telecoms reseller, MSP or ICT reseller community need high margin low support services to sell. Our business models cannot survive continued cannibalisation or revenue erosion. That's why StayPrivate is working, because you guys like it, clients like it and benefit from it. It's that simple.

I must write these columns with humility (ahem) appealing to your sound commercial instincts, good sense and your focus on customer benefits and look forward to hearing from you. StayPrivate adds-onto your existing suite of services and helps generate the holy grail for us ICT business owners 'The Rundle' – yes you heard it here first, the recurring revenue bundle.

For more information contact me at adrian@stayprivate.com or through one of our distribution partners like Zest4.



Adrian Barnard

If you think technology can solve your security problems, then you don't understand the problems and you don't understand the technology.

Fazelynia on prime topics

Here, Zest4 Managing Director Mandy Fazelynia sets out key areas of the company's strategic development and investments, covering a broad spectrum of technological, marketplace and workforce topics.

Zest4's business has grown 25 per cent since the outbreak of Covid-19 and its portfolio has expanded through the addition of new cloud telephony suppliers, connectivity resources and mobile security. The company also grew its partner base by over one hundred in the last two years, recruited and trained more staff and pressed ahead with its product development strategy, ensuring that all options are available for every size of business, with services covering all aspects of working from home, from cloud and connectivity to mobile security.

"This gives partners the opportunity to sell flexible working practices easily," commented Fazelynia. "We recognised that mobile security and device management would be essential for home workers and added those solutions to our portfolio."

Zest4's portals also received investments, giving partners self-serve efficiency and more autonomy. "The portals proved to be a vital resource throughout the last two years, allowing partners to do business how and when they want," added Fazelynia.



Mandy Fazelynia

The company's commitment to its IoT/M2M portfolio continues to bear fruit with an increasing range of products and services. "Now that managing remote workers is increasingly important for a lot of our partners' customers this has proved to be an astute move," added Fazelynia.

Key development

Another important development is Zest4's introduction of cloud telephony supplier and connectivity enhancements with UConneX, its private connectivity interconnect with 8x8 which delivers dedicated service and support. "Our priority is to continue to grow and support our partner base by delivering unified communication solutions," said Fazelynia.

There are many opportunities at hand, according to Fazelynia. "For partners, the ISDN switch-off is getting nearer and there are many businesses yet to move over to the cloud," she added. "Furthermore, IoT and M2M

are increasingly important, from monitoring empty buildings to ensuring the safety of home workers.

"The most significant trend is the exodus to hybrid working, where work becomes a thing that people do, not a place they go to. Adaptation is easy using cloud telephony and connectivity, and there's an upswing in mobile security alongside this. As well as home working we're seeing more tracking in the field than ever before. Our IoT portfolio is expanding and providing secure connectivity in various locations for our partners' customers."

On hybrid working, Fazelynia underlines the importance of recognising a balance between home and work. "This is a big change for us, but one that we're happy to embrace," she added. "Leaders need to be compassionate about the needs of their teams, understand when extra support is required and grant flexibility where necessary.

"We have curated a model where everyone is as important as the next person, and everyone in the team is as invested in our success as the leadership. If business leaders aren't nurturing their staff, if they're not understanding how each and every person provides an essential role in the overall success of a company, then they're doing it wrong. They need to be equally focused on business goals and the team that delivers them." ■

Obituary

John Garratt: Editor, mentor, and good friend – By Chris Boeree, Chairman, BPL Business Media Group

It is with great sadness I must report that John, the former Editor of Comms Dealer sister company IT Europa, died on April 16th after a short illness. John worked in the IT channel sector for most of his working life. Migrating from IBM channel sales in California to ICT channel journalism over 25 years ago, John became a highly respected editor with the launch of Channel Business in 1996. He subsequently became Editor of IT Europa where he served for 15 years until retirement only last May.

There were so many special qualities to his character, but he will be best remembered for his zest for life, his love of performing live music with his band, and his amazing network of colleagues and friends. Colleagues loved his dry humour at work and at the same time highly respected his organised and thorough approach to interviewing industry leaders at IT Europa conferences and events.

John had very high standards and placed an enormous amount of emphasis on building channel relationships. Even in this digital Zoom era he knew that nothing could ever replace relationships that

were built on trust and value add service. He possessed an insightful memory, and it was amazing how much he could recall about previous industry initiatives and people in the business.

John would always push the boundaries on new concepts and ideas, and he would explore all the media angles to get the best out of an interview. Many people who worked at IT Europa will remember John as their role model and mentor and someone who guided them through the intricacies of channel marketing. He knew people from every corner of the ICT channel industry and made friends wherever he went.

John's passing after what seems like five minutes of retirement is a great shock. It was only last October that we met in Falmouth for a belated celebration of his retirement when he asked for an update on IT Europa's plans post-Covid. It only took a moment for all the ideas to flow from his considerable mind. John leaves his wife Gill and children Charlotte and John who were very close to him and immensely proud of him. He was in a class of his own and the experiences we all had with John will always stay with us. ■



John Garratt

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EPOS rises in video tech

Leading edge audio and video together will make the critical difference in today's hybrid working environment, according to EPOS Sales Director Jane Craven who puts the company's new video credentials on the record.

You only have to look at the strategic developments and product innovations coming out of EPOS to gain a full understanding of today's workplace transformation, founded on devices designed to help businesses better communicate and collaborate. "The key step change for us has been the move to video solutions," stated Craven. "There's demand for video products but the challenge is that we're primarily known for audio. This makes total sense as we have a rich history and strong track record in audio, but we need to change perceptions of the brand and prove that our design philosophy can produce video products at the same level as we have always done for audio. It's a burgeoning market that we're keen to leave our mark on."

EPOS's first foray into video was the launch of Expand Vision 3T last year, an all-in-one video conferencing solution designed for connecting people working remotely and those in an office setting. "The pandemic catalysed a huge rise in partners looking for audio and video solutions," added

Craven. "More and more businesses have come to us looking for consultations on how they can create a seamless hybrid experience. In fact, in the first year of the pandemic we saw growth of 75 per cent. Although a big part of this has been our expansion into video solutions, we're also constantly looking at how we can improve our current range of devices and expand them."

The pandemic and lockdowns underlined how important clear audio and video communications are to collaborate with colleagues in a remote working environment, observed Craven. "Prior to the pandemic, simply walking over to a colleague's desk seemed so trivial," she added. "I don't think anyone realised just how much value being able to speak to customers or colleagues in person added to work. Now, with many of us either hybrid working or fully remote we have to find ways of matching that in-office experience, or come as close as possible."

"But many businesses aren't giving a thought to



Jane Craven

We want to bring the same level of precision to video as we have in audio

which devices and tools their employees are using, creating a fractured working experience. Devices may not be properly optimised or the quality may not match expectations. So, strategically, we're communicating this reality to our customers and prospects, both directly and through our channel partners."

AI integration

The integration of AI into communications devices is a significant development. It offers an opportunity to create devices that can adapt to any situation while meeting personal preferences. EPOS has taken a proactive approach utilising AI. In 2020 it introduced EPOS AI which uses machine learning and AI to help separate human

voices from other sounds. "Using deep learning tools in the EPOS sound laboratory our engineers have enabled EPOS AI to effectively learn," commented Craven. "Our flagship headset, the ADAPT 660, was our first UC-certified headset to incorporate machine learning to enhance voice pick-up. Coupled with its adaptive active noise cancellation it offers greater clarity for users."

These developments reflect key considerations for business leaders, brought about by the impact of Covid-19 lockdowns, observed Craven, who posed a critical question: How can leaders create a consistent experience for staff, partners and clients?

"Covid has shown us that audio is simply not enough," she added. "Video communications have come to the forefront whether you're communicating with a client, or maybe a doctor using telehealth solutions. Having video is vital to providing that extra level of service. In part, this is why EPOS has moved into the video space with products like the Expand Vision video conferencing solution and Expand Vision Control. We want to bring the same level of precision to video solutions as we have audio ones."

Alongside this, EPOS has invested in new technologies that make hybrid working easier for individuals. The company has leveraged psychoacoustic research from its sibling companies in the Demant Group to build the foundation of EPOS BrainAdapt which bridges the gap between what is heard and how the brain listens. "With hybrid working we're constantly moving between natural and artificial sounds and our brains can struggle to keep up," explained Craven. "Ultimately, this can result in cognitive overload, meaning the brain has to work extra hard to process the information coming in."

"Knowing this information and using our research we've designed audio solutions with algorithms and acoustics that make it easier for the brain to process sounds from colleagues working remotely. Having been cooped up during the pandemic, the EPOS team are more excited than ever to get out and showcase the tech we've been developing. They've been using it for the past couple of years, now they want to show the world." ■



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Connecting with contact

The contact centre market might be thought an opportunity only found in certain sections of the business community with scale, but in weighing up the wider prospects smaller firms could outrank larger organisations, according to our panel of experts who provide an overview of this exciting and evolving marketplace.

Covid-19 has accelerated the move to cloud technology for organisations across all sectors, transforming the traditional contact centre channel landscape and making it more competitive than ever. Content Guru Deputy CEO and co-founder Martin Taylor cited Microsoft figures that suggest 56 per cent of people around the world have stopped doing business with a company because of a poor experience. "The reason to invest in customer experience

technology is two-fold," he said. "Firstly, customers expect organisations to offer easily accessible self-service options, digital channels and intelligent contact routing. Secondly, if consumers are met with a clunky, hard to use process when interacting with an organisation, they will turn elsewhere."

It is the popularisation of digital assistants like Siri and Alexa that makes customers expect automated self-service options when contacting an organisation. This is part of a wider movement towards

digital self-service, and what gets Taylor more excited is AI such as Natural Language Processing (NLP) which can be used throughout an interaction to enhance experience levels. "NLP, which parses meaning from spoken words, can be applied not only at the beginning of a call but also throughout, enabling platforms to analyse data from both caller and agent in real-time," he said. "Integrations with knowledge management systems can then feed agents a continual stream of approved and relevant information to help them solve callers' complex issues quickly, without anyone needing to wait around on hold."

Workforce optimisation

One of Taylor's priorities right now is to invest in workforce optimisation (WFO) and workforce management (WFM) capabilities. "In a hybrid working environment, contact centre leaders need to know that their agents are being trained, supported, monitored, motivated and organised, wherever they are located," he said. "WFO suites enable automatic scheduling for human and virtual agents, omnichannel recording and full reporting, as well as integrated knowledge management, quality management and analytics plus audit technology."



Martin Taylor

Customers now demand quick, personalised responses through the full range of social media channels, including Instagram, Facebook and WhatsApp.

According to Taylor, organisations can no longer ignore the ubiquity of social media if they wish to remain competitive. "Social media use is skyrocketing, and it's not just millennials and Gen Z," he stated. "According to Sprout Social, the Baby Boomer generation has increased its social media use over the past year by 54 per cent. Customers now demand quick, personalised responses through the full range of social media channels, including Instagram, Facebook and WhatsApp. Only by integrating social

media channels with all other channels of communication can organisations ensure a highly responsive, personalised and seamless user experience, while avoiding data siloes."

It is a common trope that digital channels are increasingly widespread and customers expect businesses to be on whichever channel they choose to use, when they want to use it. "The experience a business delivers at every touchpoint has become much more important," stated Jon Seddon, UCaaS



Jon Seddon

As enterprise grade features continue to drift down to the SME market, and as we continue to witness a migration to cloud technologies, we will see growth in the small business space.

t centre opportunities

Product Manager, Gamma. "This has placed greater pressure on smaller businesses to compete with larger organisations using similar tools and technology. As enterprise grade features continue to drift down to the SME market, and as we continue to witness a migration to cloud technologies, we will see growth in the small business space."

While investments in AI and self-serve technologies will continue to grow they will also become more affordable to the smaller end of the market. But there is still a way to go before they become de facto, observed Seddon. "Self-serve based on analytics – automating the delivery of personalised answers to simple questions – is gaining traction across all segments," he added. "While it can enable agents

to focus on complex queries it's important to remember that empathy drives higher customer loyalty, so we'll never see a complete replacement of customer service agents' functions. Some of these technologies free up an agent's time to focus on what can truly bring value to the company and the customer journey."

The channel has always been well placed to deliver a more personalised experience to customers. And Seddon says now is the time to leverage that position. "For the channel, the opportunity has never been greater," he said. "There is much room for improvement to make the delivery and management of CX solutions quicker and easier. It's a game changer for the industry and a key differentiator for customers. I'm also interested in how to drive the same pace of



Simon Blackwell

If you can deliver high levels of omnichannel integration then you have something so sticky that the lifetime value of that customer will be some of the best you'll enjoy.

innovation in contact centre products that we've seen in our UCaaS tools over the last few years. Both are key areas of interest for Gamma."

Customer expectations

The drive to deliver a better customer experience has in the main be catalysed by rising customer expectations rather than a technology push, according to Simon Blackwell, Chief Marketing Officer, TelcoSwitch Group. "With customers turning to channels like WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter etc, the result is a fragmentation of communication silos," he said.

"The challenge for customers is to pull these communication channels into one central place that manages everything. As a channel partner, if you can deliver high levels of omnichannel integration then you have something so sticky

that the lifetime value of that customer will be some of the best you'll enjoy."

It is an industry given that all businesses are contact centres, but what's obvious to channel partners is not always so clear to end user companies themselves, so Blackwell says customer education is vital. "Every vendor not only has this challenge but has an obligation to help channel partners get that message across to the end customer," he said.

"There are plenty of sub-50 headcount businesses talking with their customers over Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp. Many are doing it from smartphones because they don't know there's a better way that enables them to centralise those channels within their phone system. Education around omnichannel and customer

experience is something we'll keep shouting about."

TelcoSwitch is also giving the megaphone to AI, which offers significant opportunities to improve service, performance and employee wellness within the contact centre. "AI is baked into how we've addressed the market," said Blackwell. "This is focused on two key areas: Conversational-based AI to resolve customer queries through chatbots or fed to the right department. The second area is analysing conversations between customers and agents or employee, by blending what was said along with the pitch and tone of each voice to enable AI to score the call. Calls could be flagged to supervisors where the AI identifies an agent needing more training, or flagged to HR if the AI indicates that an agent may be under pressure and in need of support."

Enreach specialises in contact centres across Europe and is set to launch CC to the UK. "We have a number of new products in the pipeline," said Enreach CEO Duncan Ward. "Contact centre solutions are becoming the new norm in businesses of all sizes across all industries. Any business, big or small, that takes customer calls should consider a contact centre solution to provide data and insight, to make efficiencies and identify trends in their business.

"A cloud-based contact centre provides flexibility and gives employees options in terms of remote working. Since employees can access the software online, it's much easier for them to work in different locations
Continued on page 30



Duncan Ward

Any business that takes customer calls should consider a contact centre solution to provide data and insight, to make efficiencies and identify trends in their business.

M&A trends: 2022 outlook

Sector consolidation shows no sign of abating with transactions and valuations remaining high – and a new trend could be emerging among trade buyers, writes Knight Corporate Finance Director Paul Billingham.



Paul Billingham

TalkTalk's acquisition of Virtual1 significantly increases its presence in the wholesale connectivity market. It provides additional scale and the improved partner interfaces that are so important to wholesale channel providers. Virtual1 had previously been backed by private equity provider BGF in 2016, and we would assume there would have been significant interest from private equity in a secondary buy-out, but following on from Daisy's recent acquisition of XLN (circa £21 million EBITDA), and Wavenet's acquisition of Excell Group (circa £6 million EBITDA) we could be entering a new phase of sector consolidation at the larger scale end of the market driven by trade buyers rather than private equity.

As we have written many times, private equity has been more active than trade buyers for businesses at the £5 million-plus EBITDA level, with a range of ICT providers moving through primary, secondary and even tertiary private equity backed buy-outs, rather than exit to larger trade acquirers. Almost all of these investments have been to support M&A activity and this has driven high

volumes of transactions and maintained healthy valuations for ICT providers of all sizes. Even during the pandemic and the lockdown period, transaction volumes remained high for trade deals as the consolidators continued to acquire given the resilience shown by the sector.

Maintaining volumes

We don't see any sign of a reduction in volumes of trade sales in the sector during 2022, and the latest Megabyte Quarterly Barometer highlighted Comms and IT Resellers as the hottest section across the whole ICT & Digital spectrum in its UK activity heat map, followed by Cloud Services and Networks & Connectivity. At Knight we continue to be busy with eight transactions completed in Q1 in 2022 (we completed 24 in total in 2021) and six or seven more imminent. For business owners in the ICT sector there still remains a range of options open in terms of crystallising all or some value in their business.

In a significant change of direction to the last seven

or eight years, we expect to see some much larger sector transactions featuring trade buyers rather than private equity, with the recent Excell Group, XLN and Virtual1 exits being the first of a larger number of trade deals at the higher end of the market. This is less down to private equity suddenly losing interest in the sector – despite significant falls in valuations of publicly quoted technology companies – and more to do with the appetite of a number of private equity backed consolidators to now seriously scale up.

We expect to see maybe one or two mergers between consolidators, and some more straightforward trade buy-outs. Both will present significant synergy opportunities post-deal that will be important as margins continue to be squeezed as voice services continue to migrate from the old PSTN world to IP based solutions.

Warning

Beware – is your business being offered to buyers without you realising? Knight has had instances where brokering sites are listing ICT businesses for sale without owners being aware of it, in order to facilitate deals without any prior agreement from sellers. If you are considering any type of transaction always talk to a corporate finance provider that can set out all of your options, knows buyer behaviour in the sector, and is not going to rush you into a process you may not be ready for.

Continued from page 29 but still manage their time effectively. Working remotely can help cut business costs too if you want to downsize your office space or aren't ready to scale up."

Ward has observed a strong move to packages and bundles that give customers everything they need easily and in an accessible way. "Customers are recognising the need to have one supplier for everything, from phone systems to broadband to mobile and more," he added. "The channel needs to focus on bringing new products into the mix to support customers as their needs evolve, combining IT and communications but most importantly a great customer experience."

Ward is also seeing an increase in demand for machine led communication options such as chatbots and SMS capabilities. "However, this does not take away from the need for human intervention and highly trained employees," he added. "AI can be valuable to businesses as they facilitate seamless live communications and make customer service available 24/7. Not only does this save time and money, it also enables a smoother customer journey."

According to Voiceflex Director Paul Taylor business

is pushing in two ways, all online or all phone. "Very few seem to get the balance right," he said. "With the market shifting more towards online sales, backend support is even more important. And with so many online purchase options, one bad experience and you've lost the customer forever. So there has never been a better opportunity for the channel to sell contact centre applications, large and small."

Common platform

Taylor noted that customers require the same platform across the whole business. "For example, traditional applications had a telephony application, an add-on CC, add-on call recording and add-on PCI compliance," he said. "UCaaS encompasses the full range of applications within one common platform."

Taylor pointed to Voiceflex Flow as an example of this. It has two elements – one serving the basic needs of inbound calls, the other is omnichannel CC which adds channels like WhatsApp, email, Facebook, ticketing and unified agent view. These applications cover all the bases from entry level to full multichannel contact centre. "The contact centre, no matter the size, needs to adapt to the customer's changing needs," added Taylor. ■



Paul Taylor

There has never been a better opportunity for the channel to sell contact centre applications, large and small. ■



CHANNEL CHAMPIONS

7th July 2022, Regents Park

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May 12th

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Channel Champions offers a unique promotional opportunity to associate your organisation with high achievers. And we have made entering simple and easy to do. Just register on the awards website www.channel-champions.com, which will enable you to view all the categories and download the entry forms. The entry deadline is May 5th, 2022, so there's plenty of time to enter. If you are shortlisted, you will then join other finalists who will gather at a celebratory summer garden party with the awards ceremony staged in an open marquee followed by networking in the glorious surroundings of London's most elegant Royal Park.

Terry O'Brien, CEO of Channel Champions headline sponsor DWS, commented: "We



Terry O'Brien

delighted to play our part in paying tribute to the amazing professionals in our fantastic industry. Staging Channel Champions in the open air with a festival atmosphere makes this an event to remember.

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

Event sponsors already lined up for Channel Champions are CityFibre, Evolve IP, Gamma, NFON, Talk Talk Wholesale Services, Union Street, Virtual1 and Voiceflex.



Ruth Kennedy, Chief Sales Officer, TalkTalk Wholesale Services commented "TalkTalk Wholesale Services are delighted to be the sponsor for the 'Sales & Account Management' categories at Channel Champions 2022.

Comms Dealer always does an amazing job at bringing the channel community together to celebrate success. As always, it's a great honour to sponsor Channel Champions and recognise all the hard work in the channel. We can't wait for the event as we look forward to seeing our friends and colleagues and raising a glass to celebrate the achievements we've seen in the channel this year. Best of luck to all the entrants!"

Neil Wilson, Product Strategy Director of Virtual1 commented "As a wholesale provider, the channel is the lifeblood of the Virtual1. So we are delighted to be supporting the Channel Champions awards once again in 2022. In our highly competitive industry, the end user experience is critical. The Channel Champions are those teams that gallantly deliver on their customer promises, making sure that their service not only succeeds, but is a roaring success! I'm very much looking forward to seeing everyone again at Regents Park to toast to all of the hard work and dedication of the teams across the Channel."

To enter go to www.channel-champions.com

Stay ahead of the curve in the march to as-a-service models

Margin in Comms-as-a-Service (MiCaaS) is the 'must attend' event for SME Resellers transitioning to new service based models, voice, data and mobile resellers with a range of valuable insights into how to shift towards or refine their managed services business model.

With the unstoppable shift to the supply and consumption of ICT and comms services as a service, and against a backdrop of increasingly dispersed workforces the channel has experienced and reacted to seismic shifts in 2022; but the race is not over yet – join us at MiCaaS to understand how you can position your business effectively to avoid being left behind.

The transformation to digital and cloud technologies has meant that comms solutions and the networks and software platforms they sit on are now being delivered 'as a service' and in this challenging economic climate customers increasingly value comms being delivered within Opex finance models.

The big issue for resellers is understanding how to present 'Comms as a Service' within these new frameworks and ensure that customers remain happy and 'sticky' and would never consider going elsewhere for the comms solutions they rely on. And with 60% of organisations moving to hybrid working practices, wrapping connectivity and cloud-based hardware into bundled solutions

billed as a service must be the way forward for channel partners.

The need to provide a holistic Customer Experience (CX) has become a fundamental component of a reseller's armoury and has been intensified as the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent work from home directives have transformed living rooms into offices, classrooms, and gyms.

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The agent's champion

Great customer experiences start with the right blend of technology and human interaction, according to Cirrus CEO Jason Roos who describes himself as a contact centre 'nerd' and dedicated 'champion' of agents.

Contact centre agents too often find themselves held back by technology that's not fit for purpose. Spending hours on manual tasks instead of boosting customer engagements is an ineffective use of contact centre time and resource, which is why technology is playing a major role in transforming the contact centre space. "The traditional contact centre management structure has collapsed," stated Roos. "Supervisors would previously have agents sitting a few metres away and could listen to conversations and assess how issues are being addressed. They could monitor a wall board with an iPad or laptop and take immediate action with people present in the office."

"But following Covid-19 and the move to home working, monitoring can no longer be achieved through proximity. The key is analytics platforms. They enable teams to monitor workflow and determine when supervisors need to act in real time. Using technology, the management structure within traditional contact centres can be reorchestrated to suit modern requirements."

Another transformative factor is that the telephone has become a secondary contact method to messaging applications like Facebook Messenger, SMS, Twitter DMs and WhatsApp, where consumers can quickly and easily ask a question in real-time. "As a result, businesses must pivot to focus on answering this demand from consumers and put messaging first," added Roos. "Voice comes into the equation once the discussion becomes too complex."

There has also been a change in customer perceptions around their expectations of agents. "For example, noise cancelling headsets were a contact centre norm," noted Roos. "Now, businesses are letting consumers know that agents may be working from home and background noise from dogs barking to children playing may be heard on a call. Agents have been humanised more, so consumers relate to them and the potential for a positive engagement becomes more likely."

According to Roos, micro firms can no longer think it's good enough to just have a telephone number



Jason Roos

and email address. "You are now competing in the same world as the large multinational corporations, and the problem these small businesses face is the cost to

a blended approach when deploying new technology. "All too often businesses will dive headfirst into the AI pool, rarely taking a moment to comprehensively plan out

At our core, we're a team of contact centre nerds who really do care about our customer relationships

entry to deploy the same kind of technology," said Roos. "It is critical for businesses like Cirrus to provide apps that allow micro business owners and their teams to access, connect and engage through multiple channels via a simple application that isn't cost prohibitive. This segment of the market is where we're seeing huge growth and demand."

Another trend Roos is seeing is the emergence of chatbots and AI, and the power of

their approach," he said. "AI is a valuable tool, but only when it's used correctly."

Strategic analysis

In the contact centre space AI is being used to analyse calls and interpret the outcome. Key questions include – was the issue resolved quickly and effectively? Is there a good chance of boosting customer loyalty? And what could have been done differently to improve the process further? Analysis is even being used to help predict customer

behaviour, allowing teams to advise on how best to tackle different responses."

Among the results of Cirrus's survey of contact centre agents it was highlighted that AI provides them with more information on the customer to handle queries quicker, enabling them to focus on more challenging tasks. "But while AI has its uses – such as delivering deeper analysis and freeing agents to focus on boosting customer engagements – agent interaction remains at the heart of contact centre activity," said Roos. "There is still demand for human communication when resolving more complex issues. Nothing beats human intuition when it comes to solving problems. A blended approach is the best way forwards."

Driving customer value also means adopting a sophisticated approach. "It's all about demonstrating skill, care and expertise to be different and stand out in the noisy market," added Roos. "Resellers who use the contact centre as a differentiator are standing out among the crowd. We continue to operate with a forward thinking mindset that is driven by the demands, needs and requirements of our customers."

"This is all built around a consultancy-first approach. At our core, we're a team of contact centre nerds who really do care about our customer relationships. We believe in championing contact centre agents. They are the heroes of the industry so all of our efforts are channelled towards supporting them in their critical roles." ■

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Strategies for staff wellness

Among the channel's CEOs leading the charge on employee wellbeing is Six Degrees chief exec **Simon Crawley-Trice** who seeks every way possible to ensure the wellness of his people.



Simon Crawley-Trice

Six Degrees has responded positively to the wellbeing needs of its employees and proved that it is possible to nurture physical and mental wellness while succeeding in business at the same time. In fact, the company's health strategy underpins its expansion plans. "Our people are our best investment," stated Crawley-Trice. "Six Degrees aspires to be the UK's number one supplier of secure technology services and we can't do that without all of our people working effectively together – so we need to protect them."

Health and welfare has been a big focus of Six Degrees for a number of years, particularly helping employees to think about their wellbeing, to talk about it and to take positive action. The business has an employee group called Healthy Minds, Healthy Lives which drives wellness initiatives across the organisation. These range from Tough Mudder weekends and Step Challenges to the provision of regular Lunch and Learn sessions. "We're appreciating more and more the link between our physical and mental health," stated Crawley-Trice. "In early 2019 we trained a number

enough to incorporate as many methods of engaging employees as possible – including webinars, lunch and learns, newsletters and videos. "You name it, we've tried it," added Crawley-Trice. "The activities that have been most successful, however, were those that were initiated by employees themselves. It's been rewarding for us to create a space where people can work on themselves, bond, and in many instances help others."

of our people as Mental Health First Aiders who now voluntarily undertake the additional role of supporting our team members in times of need, and guide them towards appropriate support. These volunteers also act as a signpost for information and resources for the wider Six Degrees team."

Flexible approach
Mindful that one size does not fit all Six Degrees offers a monthly timetable of classes and webinars ranging from pilates and HIIT classes to financial wellbeing webinars. "Last month the executive team and I led wellbeing walks throughout London, encouraging our team members to take a much-needed break from the screen, get some steps in, while ensuring that colleagues who joined during lockdown have a chance to meet other people in a social setting," said Crawley-Trice.

Six Degrees has a diverse workforce so its approach to wellbeing must be adaptable and flexible

Six Degrees is going through a phase of transformation which can be difficult for some people, but the company is not seeing an increase in health issues, just the opposite. "We're seeing more people engaging with the information and support that's available and proactively using them to build their resilience," added Crawley-Trice. "As we gear up for the next phase of our growth it's been fantastic to see people better preparing themselves and supporting our ability to grow."

For Crawley-Trice it's a sure sign of success that Six Degrees' Healthy Minds, Healthy Lives group is led and run by employees for employees. "Our people are engaging with each other, sharing their knowledge and experiences and having a good time while doing it," he commented. "We're more able to talk about physical and mental wellbeing as an organisation which proves that people are thinking about these important matters differently."

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Nurturing employee well

Staff wellbeing has become a priority for employers and initiatives that extend beyond physical health are being implemented as part of an all-embracing and cultural approach to the wide ranging wellness needs of colleagues. Here, four industry trailblazers show how to set the wellbeing standard.

To support its employees Excalibur put in place a health and wellbeing programme in 2018. In consultation with its people the company created a plan that focuses on physical, financial and mental health. The programme's component parts range from free fruit in the kitchen and having a small gym to inviting experts to talk about managing personal finance, effective time management and mental health.

"Employees like having a programme in place," said Peter Boucher, CEO, Excalibur Communications. "It shows them that we care about how they are as individuals as well as looking at the wider health and

wellbeing of the company. The programme makes sure we regularly review how engaged employees are and how our structure works. It's not a static programme, so suggestions on how we can improve or enhance it are welcome. Furthermore, it is the role of management and leaders to keep health and wellbeing on the radar. We review it every month. It's not just the job of the HR department."

Even before Boucher joined Excalibur over five years ago the company aimed to be a Top 100 Sunday Times Best UK Small Company to Work For. Since then it has been recognised as a Top 100 Best Company four times. In 2021, Excalibur ranked as the UK's 75th Best Small

Company to Work For. A key measure of Excalibur's progress is an annual staff satisfaction survey that gauges employee engagement. This is done externally via the Best Companies to Work For scheme. Boucher noted that it's also a good way for the Excalibur management team to garner feedback and ensure its health and wellbeing plans are on track. In 2021 the company scored highly with over 80 per cent of staff giving a thumbs up on their work-life happiness.

"If your team is happy and working well business outcomes tend to be positive," added Boucher. "Over the last three years, which have not been straight forward, we have maintained healthy turnover and profitability. And a constant theme in our customer feedback is that they enjoy working with Excalibur colleagues and that they do a great job. There is a clear link between employee and customer engagement."

Intercity Technology operates a 24/7 Employee Assistance Programme which offers a confidential counselling line that colleagues can use if they are struggling with mental, physical and financial wellbeing. "We aim to ensure our colleagues pay attention to their thoughts, feelings and the world around them," commented Callum Downing,



Peter Boucher

It is the role of the management and leaders to keep health and wellbeing on the radar. We review it every month. It's not just the job of the HR department.

People Advisor, Intercity. "It's been a highly challenging couple of years for many people so our initiatives are designed to support colleagues and help them to focus on what works for them. For example, we have plans to invite a financial wellbeing guest speaker to talk about an area that is often overlooked when considering mental health."

Key events

Intercity Technology focuses on wellbeing in multiple key areas, including connecting with other people through regular one-to-ones, team

meetings and social events. It also relaunched its annual wellbeing calendar which focuses on two or three key events each month, such as Stress Awareness Month. "These events can range from comms to internal training or practical sessions," added Downing. "For example, we will be using our company Strava page, which promotes physical activity, to set up a walking challenge for On Your Feet Britain."

According to Downing, the more options the better for getting colleagues involved and supporting causes. "By



Callum Downing

We aim to ensure our colleagues pay attention to their thoughts, feelings and the world around them.

Wellbeing and mental health

providing opportunities through volunteering, charity fundraising, exercise campaigns and guest speakers, we are more likely to attract more interest and uptake from a greater range of colleagues," he added. "Our initiatives allow colleagues who may not work closely to get together and take part in different activities and events, which is at the centre of the culture we are trying to develop. There is nothing more rewarding than getting involved."

CityFibre has also improved collaboration between various teams across the organisation and has a dedicated team focused on staff wellbeing activities and a budget to support them. "A team of volunteers support the physical and mental health of employees," explained Chloe McGain-Harding, Mental Health Lead, CityFibre. "The initiative is driven from Director level and regularly reiterated to all staff by the CEO."

CityFibre also provides private healthcare options to all employees and encourages them to take advantage of additional benefits such as physio and counselling. "We are working on various awareness weeks, activities and events including Mental Health Awareness week in May," added McGain-Harding. "We will be focusing on mental health, physical wellbeing and encouraging physical activity and the importance of sleep. We've planned various events and webinars across the year on things like guided meditation and have ongoing communications across the company offering advice and tips."

According to McGain-Harding, employees who are truly supported will feel more motivated, have a better work-life balance, be less stressed and therefore more engaged within their roles and generally have better health both physically and mentally. "It's an ongoing learning process to see what works best and which types of support and advice are most required by our employees," she added. "That's why we encourage feedback and requests across the organisation so we can deliver what is needed and cover the most useful areas and topics."

Ongoing process

CityFibre has achieved high participation and attendance rates for its wellness events and activities, and McGain-Harding says feedback is key to success. "We have a diverse workforce and have been covering a wider range of topics and issues to ensure as many needs are met as possible," she



Chloe McGain-Harding

We encourage feedback and requests across the organisation so we can deliver what is needed and cover the most useful areas and topics.



Ayshea Robertson

It is important to understand that everyone is different, and we need to consider all aspects of a person's wellbeing – not just the parts that relate to work.

commented. "Most recently we've covered work-life balance for busy parents, prostate cancer awareness and stress awareness."

It is clear for all to see that health and wellbeing

plays an important role in employee engagement and can have a positive impact on the attraction and retention of talent. It is also a fundamental component of creating and nurturing the right company culture. "Creating a great culture focused around the wellbeing of your people is key to long-term success," said Ayshea Robertson, People & Culture Director, Zen Internet.

"Our strategy addresses factors that may affect employee wellbeing from both inside and outside the organisation. We have a number of pillars within the wellbeing plan such as safety, personal health – physical and mental – life factors, working environment, resilience and giving back."

Since embedding these pillars into its wellbeing strategy Zen ensures each area gets the right amount of focus. "It is important to understand that everyone is different,

and we need to consider all aspects of a person's wellbeing – not just the parts that relate to work," commented Robertson.

She also noted that inspired people who are well led and well looked after will deliver a superior customer experience. In turn this delivers a sustained financial performance. Here, Robertson provides some top tips for those wanting to support and improve their staffs' wellbeing.

"When it comes to your health and wellbeing strategy, remember to consider the scope of impact both internal and external factors can have," she commented. "Listen to your people to ensure activities are inclusive, engaging and relevant. And take a long hard look at resilience and how supporting your people will ensure they can operate effectively in a more versatile working environment." ■

Rising energy prices threaten



Photo by Anna Nekrashevich

Soaring energy and fuel prices have blindsided organisations across all sectors in the UK and forced two comms-based quandaries to the forefront of business planning.

The first question surrounds the working from home trend. Will the UK see a return to the office as employees look to avoid the rising costs of heating the house, or will companies issue the opposite directive, to counter the cost of commuting?

Rising bills also bring into question the post-pandemic IT spend that has been long predicted by commentators in the channel. Resellers must help organisations see the instant ROI opportunities for technologies that reduce fuel and energy spending.

To help demystify the situation, we asked our commentators to consider how soaring prices would affect them and their customers.



PHILIPPA BAILEY
BLIZZARD GROUP

"Businesses are currently facing energy renewal prices of up to ten times their previous rates. Our energy department is seeing this first hand as we break the bad news on a daily basis. The hospitality industry is particularly badly hit, with energy suppliers still reluctant to offer contracts to this sector after the challenges of Covid, leaving many hospitality businesses with no choice but to pay expensive high-risk rates, perpetuating their financial difficulty. Some businesses whose energy costs make up a high proportion of their overheads, such as manufacturing, will be thrown into crisis when their current fixed contracts end. They will be forced to raise their prices significantly which will have a knock-on impact throughout the supply chain. It's likely that these worst-hit businesses will be less likely to invest in ICT upgrades as they go into survival mode unless they can see an immediate return on investment."



GRACE LAWLESS
PRAGMA GROUP

"It's too early to determine whether soaring prices will prompt more working from home, but it is important to note that working from home is not cost free. Due to this, soaring prices could even prompt more working from the office so that people can minimise the impact on their home bills. However, the current challenges with recruitment, increasing salaries and the importance of retaining good people mean a likely increase in innovation and investment in ICT upgrades as people look to increase automation and remove mundane tasks. Inevitably, there will be increases in prices across the supply chain so resellers will look to vendors to optimise efficiencies and therefore costs. Pragma have made significant investments in inventory to maintain all product lines, to protect against semiconductor shortages and risks of shipping delays, and to absorb short term cost increases."



SUSIE WARDELL
EVOKE TELECOM

"Following 18 months of creeping inflation, the reality of today's rocketing fuel and utility prices have cemented the need for price increases in the channel. What is more, with CPI at 7% and RPI at 9.8%, pressure is being brought to bear on employer and employees alike. Hybrid working now comes with an added cost to the home budget which few companies can afford to offset with supportive bonuses. Caught in this squeeze, companies are having those cost versus investment conversations across not only new but existing services. Herein lies the opportunity for our industry, as the needs creation piece has already been done for us. We have the solutions to make those investment decisions and ICT upgrades a must have as opposed to a cost burden. Never was the phrase 'if you stand still, you are going backwards' as appropriate as it is today."



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DAVID ELLIS
FOCUS GROUP

"Keeping in touch with your customers is vital and the ability to offer help on energy efficiency services is a growing need, be it solar panels, lighting, or energy optimisation. Did you know the average UK voltage is around 267V whereas most equipment manufactured in Europe will run the most efficiently on 220V? There is also a range of government grants and schemes to help businesses realise these savings on OFGEMs website, but it's unlikely many businesses know this. Higher prices mean energy needs to be managed efficiently to avoid having to pass the costs on to the end users and businesses have stated that they may have to restrict investment due to higher utility costs. The Energy team at Focus Group are working to provide support to all customers on mitigating the rising costs and advise on how to improve energy efficiency in business."



SOHNI RAITHATHA
REDSQUID

"When prices soar, it hits businesses in every sector across everything from services and rent to salaries - forcing organisations to adapt. Higher prices will always have an impact on the investment businesses are able to complete, but it is also important that we keep the momentum we have seen the last year and make sure to keep business confidence high. On the other hand, while energy prices might be soaring, we also see an opportunity for businesses to continue the digital journey that allows them to get rid of costly hardware and unnecessary equipment. Rising prices are yet another incentive for businesses to kickstart their digital transformation, and into a working life where they utilise the applications they have to their full extent while investing in future-proof technology that will allow them to achieve cost savings in other areas."



TARA KELMAN
9 GROUP

"The pandemic taught us to retain an agile approach when working with our partners. Businesses now have freedom of choice when it comes to the physical workplace with many adopting a hybrid work model. Rising utility and fuel costs look set to further influence this choice. We're fortunate that the portfolio of services we offer are remote-ready, keeping partners connected to their customers and in turn their own customer's end users. The days of sweating your assets are long gone - now it's about modernising your communications and connectivity to fit the workplace of the future. High energy prices may have a positive impact on investment in legacy upgrades to support longer term homeworking, reducing fuel consumption and commuting costs for staff. The ROI of remote working technology such as productivity, operational effectiveness, and employee satisfaction make for a solid business justification when each benefit is monetised."



BERNIE MCPHILLIPS
PANGEA

"Almost overnight, energy budgets have gone from being fairly predictable to blindsiding most businesses. It's going to significantly impact profit margins, investment plans, and bottom lines for most providers in the channel. Everyone from network operators who carry our data traffic, to couriers who deliver our solutions, will be monitoring the situation closely. The impact typically affects end users most, with cost increases being passed along, but lost margins can also be recovered through innovation. Think smart lighting that switches off when no movement is detected in a room, or heating that shuts down when windows are opened. The same goes for fuel: fleets can lower costs with route planning systems, and analyse driver behaviour to encourage safer, more efficient driving. Customers will rush to find these innovative solutions, as ROI from energy and fuel savings will now be much higher, which makes it a huge opportunity for the channel."



CHERIE HOWLETT
JOLA

"Soaring fuel prices may impact overheads and ultimately EBITDA in the channel. At Jola, we are continuing to use a hybrid model of Teams calls and face-to-face meetings. We have found Teams to be very efficient and partners have been receptive to running meetings and training webinars online. We have managed to save thousands a month on travel and entertainment by using this model. Of course, there are situations where face-to-face meetings are essential such as taking part in partner sales events and social activities. Now may be a good time to look at changing your car policy towards company-owned electric vehicles since they are kinder to the environment, cheaper to run and come with very generous Benefit in Kind taxes and Capital Allowances."



IAN ROWAN
WILDIX

"Investments always come down to a single factor - is the investment going to give an ROI and over what time frame? With fuel costs directly impacting supply chains and customers facing higher costs, that window of ROI is going to be extended. What we must do as a smart vendor is add value in other aspects of our solution to further reduce that ROI. Each software revision, each new function we implement is designed to create additional value, not just tick a functionality box. At Wildix, all senior UK staff are now using fully electric vehicles. We have implemented a government backed cycle to work scheme which allows staff local to our Headquarters to subsidise the cost of a new bike as a tax incentive. We discourage our partners from placing an order for a single piece of hardware by adding a levy to non-master packaged items."

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Parven joins Zen



Emma Parven

EMMA Parven has joined Zen Internet's partner division as Marketing Manager, bringing a strong strategic emphasis to the role. "My objective is to create a marketing structure that enables our partners to be as effective as possible," she stated. "Be this through sales enablement, campaign delivery, educational content or hands on support, whilst leveraging our challenger strategy and people-first approach."

Parven joins Zen having previously been Head of Marketing for Daisy Communications, working across both the direct and partner business channels.

"I've worked in marketing my whole career, since starting at the age of 16, then half in marketing management and half in agency roles," commented Parven.

"Zen's challenger brand strategy

appealed to me, as did the culture and the fact that Zen has its own growing network. This presents a significant opportunity for our partners given the current changing landscape in telco and the impending WLR stop-sell. I am excited by Zen's aspirations for growth and by being part of achieving that."

Also on the move...

AUGUST Equity-backed Air IT's growth and acquisition strategy will be spearheaded by incoming CEO James Steventon. He is credited with scaling a number of PE/VC-backed businesses. "I want Air IT to be the go-to partner for managed IT services in the UK for the SME community," he said. Air IT Chairman Ian Brown added: "James brings extensive leadership experience and a strong track record of growth in private equity backed technology businesses like ours."



James Steventon

ADAM Lowe's appointment as Head of Operations for White Horse Telecom adds two decades of experience to the business. Lowe joins from 9 Group where he was Business Services Manager having worked for the business for 14



Adam Lowe

years. Prior to this he was Billing Manager at Club Communications which was acquired by 9. His new remit includes responsibilities for the operations, billing and commercial aspects of White Horse Telecom. Founder and Managing Director Paddy Coppinger said: "To have Adam on board is a great step

forward for the business. A seasoned professional such as Adam would make any company proud." Lowe added: "It's a new challenge for me and I'm looking forward to working within a family business again. Having collaborated with White Horse Telecom on several projects over the last ten years I'm thrilled to be joining the team."

STEVEN Try brings almost 20 years industry experience to his new role as UK&I Channel Manager at Snom. He kicked off his comms career with Alcatel-Lucent before spending time at Avaya, Panasonic, and for the past three years worked for a Titanium 3CX reseller. "Snom UK wants to have the market penetration it has elsewhere in Europe," stated Try. "As the team puts it, we want to 'Snomify' the UK comms market." Channel Manager Lee Underwood added: "I'm looking forward to seeing what we can achieve together as a team and extending Snom's presence in the UK and Ireland."

KCOM CEO Dale Raneberg is leaving the business after three years, making way for incoming chief exec Tim Shaw who was previously MD of the Hull-based group's Wholesale and Networks division. Shaw joined KCOM in 2019 and has overseen the £100m expansion of its full fibre network across east Yorkshire and north Lincolnshire, now reaching more than 250,000 properties.

Manuel moves to Six Degrees

SIX Degrees has pulled in David Manuel as Chief Financial Officer. He joins from Capita where he served in a variety of roles including Director of Group Finance and Interim Group CFO. Other senior leadership positions include stints at Vodafone, Colt, Openreach, RBS and Deloitte.

"There is immense opportunity in this space and Six Degrees has been up-front about its ambitions to scale," said Manuel.

CEO Simon Crawley-Trice added: "David is

right about our ambitions to scale: Six Degrees has set its sights on being the UK's number one provider of secure technology services. Businesses today are faced with so many digital transformation challenges, including public and hybrid cloud adoption and integrating agile working technologies securely. Six Degrees is well placed to support mid market and low end enterprise customers tackle these issues."



David Manuel

Agilitas appoints McMullan as CFO

STEVE McMullan has taken a seat in Agilitas' boardroom as incoming CFO. He brings over 25 years experience in senior financial roles across the private equity, large corporate and PLC arenas; and has a strong track record of building and growing multi-site B2B businesses – organically and through domestic and international M&A – on to the realisation of value through exit. McMullan also has a particular interest in strategy development and implementation, operational and financial performance management, process re-engineering and process improvement, and will be utilising his experience to support Agilitas' growth objectives. CEO Shaun Lynn said: "The business is accelerating an ambitious growth strategy and there are many exciting times ahead. Steve will play an integral role in these efforts."



Steve McMullan

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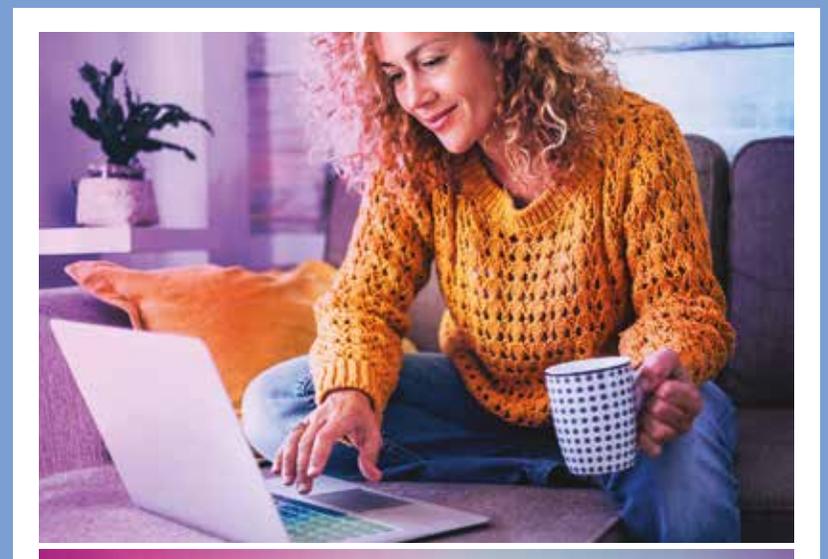
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