

Region needs to find a silver lining to the techno cloud

THE launch of the Temovi Business Cloud marks the end of a seven-year search by telecommunications expert Tom Cullen.

The versatile new system is the biggest single investment made by Birkenhead-based business communications company Digitel – and group managing director Tom says it represents a “massive transition” for his firm.

Tom is steeped in the modern history of telecommunications, after a career which saw him rapidly climb the ladder working for giant corporations ITT and IBM in Canada before returning to Merseyside to launch Digitel 25 years ago. The company started out in a big, old Victorian house in Whetstone Lane, Birkenhead, before moving to their purpose-built modern base in Ivy Street, on the Priory Industrial Estate, 15 years ago. Today it employs 30 people.

Telecommunications expert and Digitel founder Tom Cullen tells **MARK THOMAS** why local businesses need to be up to speed so they can compete on the global stage

“I started Digitel up in a recession but it grew, and continues to grow,” he says. “The market is changing, and is constantly evolving.

“Historically the telecommunications business was basically the same for about 100 years, other than the advances in central office or exchange switching equipment. A revolution took place in the 1980s that transcended the analogue lines into ISDN 2 and ISDN 30.

“Neither of those products delivered their potential, as more and more people wanted to communicate via PCs. By the time the industry had implemented ISDN exchanges take-up

in Europe was quite good but take-up in North America was not very good at all.

“And it soon became evident that the revenue streams were rocketing for data applications across the network. In the USA they took up Voice Over Internet Protocol and SIP (Session Initiation Protocol) telephony much earlier than the UK did. They are still six, seven or eight years ahead of us in terms of technology.

“From Digitel’s point of view we’ve gone in the last 25 years from being systems maintainers to installers of telephone systems for businesses and maintainers of telephone systems. We’ve acquired lines through

deregulation so we supply telephone lines, broadband, private wire data, full blown fibre, and mobile phones through 02 and Vodafone.

“We are a single source supplier of communications to the business community.”

Tom said his search for a new system was sparked by a slow but sure drift in the telecoms industry towards “unified communications” – bringing all the main communications systems and devices together to deliver them through one vehicle.

“It was an idea that had never really delivered – it was industry ‘foo-foo dust’. We’ve never really had the infrastructure to deliver it.”

But all that changed for Tom with his latest visit to the Canadian Mobile Congress telecoms summit in Toronto, one of the world’s biggest annual telecoms events.

“I knew what I was looking for, but I didn’t even know it was out there. Your



mobile phone today is full of apps. What I was looking for was a big version of that and that's what Temovi is. It has myriad applications on it.

"There was a presentation at the Canadian Mobile Congress by the CEO of the company I purchased this off. Right there I said: 'This is it'. I had a meeting with him and a meeting with the Canadian people and then we progressed to bring the platform on board.

"This product has the facility to deliver a very disruptive technology. The front of our brochure doesn't even have a telephone on it - it is

all applications. The product does have telephones, from entry level to video conferencing, so it's not all laptops, but that's where a lot of the potential is."

But Tom says the new system allows you to take the office with you, anywhere in the world. It allows you to communicate from your car or a hotel room, and talk, video conference, or collaborate on documents with other users across continents - with tiny user costs.

"As long as you've got bandwidth, you are able to carry on business and talk about it," said Tom.

"There is an array of products from

laptops to mobile phones that have the ability to communicate, to collaborate, to video conference, all from a basic platform."

Tom says the cost savings Temovi can deliver to businesses are massive. The system has already been installed and been trialled at Digitel's own offices and Tom demonstrates how it works by making a call from his mobile to another mobile phone, which shows up as an 0151 number.

"I do have a mobile number but I very rarely use it these days because this mobile app is directly connected to Temovi via public wifi, office wifi, hotel wifi, home wifi, or Voice Over Mobile Data.

"That halves the cost of mobile phone usage and it is in business grade quality. You can have all your DDI (Direct Dial In) numbers throughout the office on the system.

"It is communication as a service and it provides all sorts of value-added

situations. Voicemail is standard now, but with this system it will also call record.

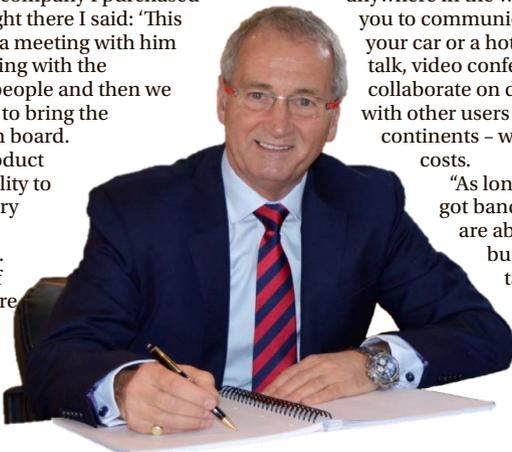
"It will also deal with faxes. It will also, with our smart office product, allow collaboration screen share, so you can screen share reports and articles, and collaborate in terms of what modifications to make.

"It has a receptionist console which is on screen and doesn't have to be on a phone. The console can be on virtually any device.

"Let's say it was the middle of January and there was a six-inch fall of snow. You can take the receptionist console on an iPad and work it from your home broadband.

"You can still receive calls and transfer calls and do whatever you were going to do in the office, even though nobody's there - it is that flexible. And you can have video conferencing or whatever you want to do."

Continued on page 8



From page 7

Another facility Tom is particularly excited about on Temovi is called "visual attendant", which is a way of communicating directly with customers who go onto a company's website.

"Many people today communicate with companies via their website, mostly through searches, and 70-80 per cent of them are from mobile phones and tablets. So with this system we embed code into the company's website. If people contact their website and are interested in a particular product or service all they have to do is press the button and an immediate voice connection will be made to that company.

"You can have a real time chat about the website and the product they are interested in. The company can send the customer a link and have a collaboration session on the website with the person calling so that they are both looking at the same screen and they can propose different products based on the needs of the customer, which is really helping them out.

"To me that is the missing link on websites. It enables a business to go one step further and give the right advice, particularly for people who are uncertain what they are looking for.

"You can also allow the customer to press a call button and speak to the department they want, sales, accounts, service or whatever. The customer doesn't pay for that call."

The Temovi Business Mobile Cloud allows employees to call the UK office from anywhere in the world via the App, completely free of charge. They can also call other UK numbers from abroad and they will be routed via the office for the price of a UK call.

"The difference in pricing is incredible," said Tom. "It is a really fantastic application."

You might expect that a system with such advanced capabilities would be available only to large corporations, but Tom says it is just as accessible for small businesses.

"The average extension on this platform costs less than a BT line. So in other words if you had the basic service plus mobile plus video conferencing it would cost less than a standard BT telephone line.

"With this system you can have one extension, ten extensions or 10,000 extensions. The important thing is that it is a service delivery platform. This kind of technology for small and medium-sized businesses was out of reach in the traditional telephony environment."

A key element of the Temovi system is that it is capable of evolving at the



same fast pace as technology. In particular, the advent of Artificial Intelligence will allow Temovi to offer a delivery vehicle for what Tom dubs "Google on steroids" - the gleaning of high-quality information and advice based on the input of leading world experts, rather than the confusing babble of misinformation and opinion that clogs up the output of traditional search engines.

"The key is that the accuracy of the information is paramount," says Tom. "So if you've got 1,000 of the world's top physicians, doctors, specialists in whatever field, all ploughing information into this from their work in terms of their experiences, this will be used by hospitals, by doctors, by ordinary people.

"It will be affordable because the cost of dealing with it will be a phone call. If you translate the Google experience and somebody paid, let's say, 25p every time they surfed on Google, they would probably make fewer searches on Google, but it wouldn't stop you doing it when you really needed to. So if you were thinking about buying some new equipment, a new stereo or whatever, you would pay your 25p. Now look at how many Google searches there are and that's why this kind of service is going to explode, because instead of it being a random search of 45 billion websites it is controlled information."

Tom's passion for his "game-changing" system is clear, and with Temovi's full official launch imminent,

The centre of Liverpool doesn't even have low-cost fibre. So SME companies are left with ADSL, which is like the dark ages, or you pay quite a lot of money for a fibre into the building.

the initial enthusiasm from potential customers has been hugely encouraging.

"The uptake has been fantastic," he says. "We've made about 15 presentations over three weeks. Every one of them is clearly interested and so far we have sold and signed up for the platform 11 of the 15. The great thing is they are local businesses.

"People communicate differently than they did 30 years ago, yet most businesses are communicating with their clients in the same way. The only addition would be a website and email, and that hasn't been around that long. The way businesses communicate today isn't just by telephone, it's by their website, social media and so on. The routes to bring people in to do business are multi-channel now and the communications vehicle a business needs has to be able to cope with that. And that is what this thing is built for."

Tom is initially rolling out the system in the north west, parts of north Wales and the West Midlands, but he plans to extend it throughout the UK.

"Digital will grow on the back of this, there is no doubt about it, because the timing is right for this product. However, it has to be, from our point of view, controlled growth.

"It's the start of a long journey with this product. It's just starting. I will be going out to LA in about six weeks' time for a big convention around this product, looking at the applications available."

Recently, Tom attended a meeting held by city region mayoral candidate Steve Rotherham, at which he mapped out his aim of turning Liverpool city

region into a "gigabit city" - with full-blown digital fibre networks.

"The centre of Liverpool doesn't even have low-cost fibre," said Tom. "So SME companies are left with ADSL which is like the dark ages, or you pay quite a lot of money for a fibre into the building. The government have put some systems and programmes together to accelerate that because it is massively important for the regeneration of cities."

A bitter critic of Britain's national carrier BT for its performance in terms of delivering digital connectivity while reaping multi-billion pound profits, Tom points again to the US and Canada, where cities and rural communities are massively ahead of the UK.

"If we go in this direction and are successful in what Steve wants to achieve, the economy in the city region will reap massive rewards. And obviously if you are in the digital industry in terms of developing software applications, social media, medical, whatever, you want to locate your business somewhere where there is plenty of bandwidth.

"If you get a segment of industry and commerce growing by 37 per cent a year, you've got to be on that bandwagon. It is a lot of investment, but the government are putting some money together to achieve this so there would be some support."

And from Digitel's perspective, the opportunity it would represent for Temovi is massive.

Said Tom: "If you look at the Gigabit city project, a product like Temovi can sit in the middle, at the core of that project and provide telecommunications services to businesses, residences and the community, with a whole host of applications."