

FROM THE INDUSTRY



Interview

WITH DAVID WHITEHEAD,
SENIOR DIRECTOR AT HARMONIC

BY MELISSA COGAVIN

DAVID WHITEHEAD UPDATES BROADBAND JOURNAL ON WHAT HARMONIC HAVE BEEN UP TO THIS YEAR, WHAT THE SECOND HALF OF THE YEAR IS LOOKING LIKE AND GIVES US A GOOD OVERVIEW OF THE INDUSTRY IN GENERAL, TRENDS, PROJECTIONS, HOPES FOR THE FUTURE.

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TELL US HOW THINGS HAVE BEEN FOR HARMONIC SO FAR THIS YEAR AND HOW DOES THE REST OF THE YEAR LOOK?

There have been some important changes at Harmonic. We divested our video business unit in the last quarter; that business has merged with MediaKind to create a video powerhouse. Harmonic is now a pure broadband company, 100% dedicated to the broadband industry. The result should see increased investment in certain strategic areas, continuing the growth trajectory we've enjoyed for the last six or seven years.

WHAT HAVE YOU ACHIEVED IN THAT TIME?

We launched our broadband solutions in 2016 with virtualised infrastructure, which was unique to the market. We've shown the industry it was the way to go, and we have been number one in the DOCSIS space since 2023. All of our competitors now have virtualised solutions - many years behind, obviously. We're currently the global market leader in cable broadband equipment, virtual CMTS and DAA, we want to get to the same position in the fibre space. We launched our PON solutions a couple of years ago, so we're still in the growth trajectory.



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IT IS CERTAINLY TRUE THAT DOCSIS HAS A MUCH LONGER TAIL THAN ANYBODY THOUGHT IT WOULD HAVE.

Exactly! If you speak with the big operators now, they're talking about migrating everybody from cable to fibre. But you also hear that DOCSIS is going to be around in the network for a long time. For a cable operator, it's not just running the fibre to the home; you still need to change the device in the home. You've got to convince the customer that if they're going to move from cable to fibre, that it should be your fibre. The reality in the UK, for example, is there are so many fibre providers now, often three or four down the same street.

IT'S REALLY COMPLICATED; UNLIKE ANYTHING THAT'S GONE BEFORE. CONSUMERS DON'T KNOW WHAT'S GOING ON.

Unfortunately, some customers still tend to focus on price. Then they discover that while it's cheaper, they don't get a voice. They don't get their video set top box that they've loved for the previous 10 years. They don't get all the recordings that they've kept religiously all that time. It's a completely different service. That makes it challenging to migrate customers to an alternate service and they are more likely then to look at alternatives.

THE CHATTER AROUND AI NEVER SEEMS TO END; CONSENSUS SEEMS TO BE THAT IT'S HERE TO STAY, BUT IT ISN'T QUITE THE GAME CHANGER EVERYONE THOUGHT IT WOULD BE.

We might use AI to choose paint colours for the living room, but applying AI to network operations is different. A lot of what passes as 'AI' today is just rules-based automation: 'If this happens, then we're going to do this.' That's not really AI: that is detecting things happening in the network, then orchestrating something in response.

AI kicks in when looking at those things at different locations in the network, reasoning between all those different points, finding linkages between what's happening in two or more places, analysing them and

doing something about it. Either with some form of self-healing, or generating trouble tickets, that are fully reasoned.

We will have solutions that we'll be showing at Connected Britain and at SCTE TechExpo that actually show you end-to-end customer quality of experience. So, we can see if a subscriber is running speed tests - which in itself is never a good thing. People don't run speed tests just to see how good their connection is. They run speed tests when they think they've got a problem with their connection.

The tools and applications that improve the connectivity for customers have been a big focus for Harmonic. We won the Technical Innovation Award last year with a solution called Beacon ISM, a tool for cable operators which detects when there are issues with the signal quality and optimises connectivity to maximise robustness and throughput. We are seeing significant reductions in help desk calls and operator truck roles for operators using that tool. Harmonic now has solutions that recognise that Beacon ISM had to take an action because there was a noise event in a network. We use that information to trigger a tool that looks at the components in the operator's network and determines exactly where the source of that ingress is.

That's where AI really plays. It's taking relevant information and working with other tools in the infrastructure to do a proper analysis, and then reason between all of those information points to give something actionable for an operator.

HAVE JOBS BEEN LOST AT HARMONIC BECAUSE OF THIS BRAVE NEW WORLD?

Not at all. People worry that AI has an impact on operations teams, but you always need some human reasoning. Our goal is to make things more efficient - never to roll the truck with an engineer unless they know exactly what to fix. If we can better equip our people and develop other parts of the solution, that's great too. Ultimately AI is extra horsepower that you throw at a problem. And if you can optimise the use of resource, you can apply it to something else.

FROM THE INDUSTRY

WHAT ELSE HAS BEEN HAPPENING?

It's continuing the growth we are already seeing. In the US, we're really starting to see scale deployment of DOCSIS 4.0 hardware, the latest generation of DOCSIS. We've got our first orders in Europe now for DOCSIS 4.0 equipment. Operators are looking at fibre migration and seeing there is value still in what they've got in the cable network. For those that want to explore the fibre route, we are increasingly seeing customers use our virtualised cOS platform to deploy both DOCSIS and PON.

The path to 10G services can be achieved much more cost effectively if you've got a good quality cable network by a small investment in cable, rather than the massive expense of a fibre deployment.

We have also recently announced our "net promoter score." We asked our customers to rate their experience with Harmonic, from zero to 10, and from that derive a "Net Promoter Score." Currently we're scoring at 82 (out of 100), which means our customers are effectively promoters of our capability – and they are happy with our solutions, our people and how we support them; we are very proud of that.

WHAT ONE THING WOULD YOU WISH FOR IN OUR INDUSTRY?

We have a lot of friends and colleagues in both Israel and Ukraine. It'd be nice to see them not have to go through what they are currently enduring. Despite everything they're dealing with, they remain totally available. We've done a good job of setting them up with backup power supplies and connectivity infrastructure. They're exceptional people and outstanding colleagues.

THE NEWS IS FULL OF KEIR STARMER RESIGNING TODAY. WITH A NEW NORTHERN PM INCOMING LOOKING ALMOST INEVITABLE WHAT YOU WOULD TELL ANDY BURNHAM IN ORDER TO IMPROVE UK BUSINESS?

Being a Yorkshireman, anything Northern is good! There is one thing in our industry that I would like to see some government focus on. I live in a little village in Hampshire, so small we never thought

we'd get fibre connectivity. A couple of years ago, an enterprising local broadband provider called 1310 brought fibre to the village. Now, everyone in the village who wants fibre broadband, has it. About three months ago, one of the larger fibre providers was digging up the street to do exactly the same thing. There is no way they'll see a return on that investment.

There are plenty of remote communities just like mine missing out on fibre while other places have three or four providers. I'd love to see the government focus on connecting those left-behind communities instead of encouraging more overbuilding. There are so many distressed providers out there with 300,000 homes passed but only 25,000 customers. That's not a viable business, is it?

ARE YOU GOING TO WOW US AT TECH EXPO? DO I NEED TO PUT THE KIDS' DENTIST ON NOTICE AGAIN?

Possibly! It'll be fun again, and I'm sure there will be sweets for all that come to see us. But the real wow factor are our live demos. Every demo we bring to the events is a real live connection. Our engineers spend months preparing, making sure that when customers and prospects come by, they see a real live demo of a solution they can deploy in their network.

FAST FORWARD 5 YEARS. WHAT DOES OUR INDUSTRY LOOK LIKE AND WHERE IS HARMONIC?

In five years, we certainly hope to establish the same leadership position in fibre that we've built in cable. I also believe by then we'll have built a substantial new business around broadband intelligence. This transforms operational data into actionable intelligence, regardless of whose equipment is deployed in the network. What's especially exciting is that this platform is vendor agnostic. We can deliver value to operators that don't have a single Harmonic component in their network today. That opens up an entirely new addressable market for us. You'll hear much more about that vision at Connected Britain and SCTE TechExpo.

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