In the news!

Bell Integration's Eugene O'Sullivan talks to PLUG:IN about Integrated IT services and why Bell is a disruptor

Bell Integration has developed into a true IT integrator, offering IT services and consultancy to businesses across Europe and Asia-Pacific. Eugene O'Sullivan, Strategy & Innovation Director, explains how success depends on combining an innovative mindset and agility with structure and due diligence.

Having started life as Bell Microsystems in 1996, Bell Integration has grown both organically and through acquisitions. It now employs just over 450 people, with core offices in the UK, Singapore and Hyderabad and additional satellite offices across Europe.

As O'Sullivan explains, Bell's business is about simplifying the IT journey for its customers.

"Whether they want to reduce cost, improve service or gain agility – it's about owning their problem," he says. "The way we do that is about minimising business disruption as well as increasing value. And we now have an end-to-end set of capabilities."

These capabilities are captured under four headings: Transact – helping clients with decisions on the supply of hardware and software, for example, whether to rent or buy; Transform – focusing on effecting change whether through applications, IT services or support; Run – delivering global managed services to manage infrastructure, applications, content and people; and Recycle – tracking and disposing of hardware in a way that meets data and environmental compliance standards and returns value to clients where possible.

A disruptive force

O'Sullivan has no doubt that Bell is a disruptor. "The nature of any IT consultancy is that you have to be a disruptor – otherwise you are just a commodity supplier of product and people," he says. "My title is Strategy & Innovation Director so what I do is look at innovation and disruption, but it has to be for the right reasons. New isn't always the best. It's about embracing technology with due diligence. It's about understanding what's new and applying it in organisations based on their appetite for taking some risk for potential higher reward – even if it's in their testbed systems versus their production systems. So yes we are a disruptor, but it's with the due diligence that goes with it."

Bell is nevertheless future-proofing its business by constantly monitoring developments in customer need and IT – by having "dedicated roles that focus on what we are doing and what we are going to do next," O'Sullivan says.

"Two of us effectively fulfil the function of Chief Technology Officer. My colleague Dave Leyland, Director of Solutions, looks at the customer need and sales enablement. I am dedicated to the technology behind that. So we have these dedicated roles that only look at what the future is bringing."

In addition, Bell is future-proofing itself by taking a vendor-neutral approach and working with lots of vendors. "Future-proofing is about not getting locked into long-term relationships just for the sake of it," O'Sullivan says. "When you look at our partner network, some of the obvious players are not there, and some players that are there are certainly new and exciting."

Applying digital technology

The way that Bell applies digital technology is more about its approach to customer delivery than the specific IT products or tools it employs. "We have a structured approach for customer delivery," O'Sullivan explains. "We also adopt what Gartner calls the 'bimodal' approach. On one hand you have a structured, given, safe, secure [approach to project delivery] – and that's essential for the core project work. But we partner that with a more agile approach for some of our new initiatives and our own product development." For example, Bell's end-to-end workload migration platform vClarus ensures that any migration is managed in a cost-effective, robust way that reduces risk and business disruption. But as O'Sullivan says: "The journey can be quite agile – try this, try that, don't get caught into some of the more traditional ways of software requirement definition."

The biggest challenge in growing the business also relates to how Bell services its clients. O'Sullivan refers to what Gartner calls the Trough of Disillusionment. "This is the gap between the early adoption of a new piece of technology and its mainstream adoption," he says. "It's easy for organisations to see something new that has resonance within the marketplace; they jump behind it, get people trained in it, and all of a sudden it goes flat for a period of time. You need to be ready for the fact that something won't go straight from proof of concept to mainstream adoption. You need to be aware of that trough."

Goals and predictions

Bell's key business goal is to continue growing as a systems integrator. "From a technology point of view, it's to understand the customer need, the benefit for them and what good looks like for them," O'Sullivan says. "We can understand what the [IT] industry is doing, what's best practice and what technology is working. We can also learn from what went wrong – we have seen systems implemented that were going well but, at a point, didn't scale. We can apply that knowledge and understanding. Crucially, as an integrator rather than a mainstream vendor, we can put in what is genuinely right for a customer across all the choices. Our medium to long-term goal is to be the problem owner for our customers."

As for what the IT services and consultancy sector will look like in the short to medium term, O'Sullivan expects the biggest change to be around cloud adoption for production systems. Most organisations would struggle to say how many of their production systems are in a genuine cloud environment, but O'Sullivan thinks it's probably around 20%-25% overall. "I think that's going to change," he says, identifying two reasons. Firstly, the technology is getting better. Although public cloud has been around for a while, provided by the likes of Microsoft, Google and Amazon, private cloud is also now moving into the mainstream adoption phase – as demonstrated, for example, by Microsoft's Azure Stack.

"It's a mimic of Microsoft Azure, but running in any data centre you want it to," O'Sullivan says. With new players such as Nutanix also coming to the fore, there are now genuine, enterprise-worthy private cloud environments for organisations to use. "That will ease some of the barriers that have stopped some of the production cloud rollout," O'Sullivan says. The second reason that more production systems will become cloud hosted comes down to "acceptance", he says.

Organisations, including the government, are more accepting of the concept that systems and data can be safely and successfully hosted in the cloud.

O'Sullivan also anticipates change in the IT services and consultancy sector in terms of a greater focus on a "holistic approach to IT transformation". As he explains, any IT transformation requires consideration of three things: the target platform, the migration or journey to get there, and how that new platform will be run. "Most organisations that provide services in any of those areas do it in isolation," O'Sullivan says. For example, an organisation might focus on where a client could be hosted and the technology needed, but leave the client to handle the migration and ongoing service management. "I think more organisations will realise you need to take a holistic approach," O'Sullivan says. As a true integrator, this is what Bell can do already.

Finally, O'Sullivan also thinks that over the next five to six years we may see fewer IT systems suppliers and greater standardisation. "A few decades ago there were two or three main suppliers, and now there are hundreds," he says. "That's down to Silicon Valley. It's not a bad thing because competition drives down cost and gives choice – but it isn't sustainable. There's so much choice now. We need a level of standardisation. So I think we will reach a happy medium of not having a stranglehold of suppliers, but equally not having so much choice that it's too easy to get things wrong."

O'Sullivan also expects other sectors to embrace change in the form of disruptive tech. "For example, banking and finance I believe will embrace blockchain," he says. "It's a technology that's going to be a big influencer. Blockchain is a ledger system. It's journaling that's completely unmodifiable. The history of a transaction is undeniable. And that's what finance is all about." Blockchain will be important for any organisations that need traceability and auditability of transactions.

Becoming more digital

The biggest barriers to digitalisation are "fear of change and of business disruption," O'Sullivan says. Therefore, UK businesses that want to become more digital need to be willing to embrace change and not let false fears deter action. O'Sullivan uses cloud computing as an example. Concerns about security – and specifically confidentiality – have acted as a "blocker" to cloud take-up, he says.

"But security actually involves three things: confidentiality, availability – always having access to something, and integrity – so it remains accurate Cloud computing is incredibly good at availability and integrity. Because of the benefits of scale, [cloud providers] can invest in a lot of technology that makes it available and maintains integrity. But from a confidentiality perspective – in terms of cyber security – it's fundamentally safer to put something in the cloud [than retain it in-house] because of all the security layers wrapped around it. Organisations applying their own cyber security protection either can't afford to go to town on it, or it's not their expertise."

Given that too great a focus on negative aspects – such as disruption – can impede the embracing of technology, O'Sullivan would like the government to emphasise the positive wherever possible. "If you want people to adopt a new process, you can do it in two ways," he says. "You can make it mandatory with consequences for not doing it – which needs policing and takes a while to get acceptance; or you can let people see the value they will get from it – and that's what achieves mainstream adoption."

We asked: Away from Bell, what disruptive tech has most impressed you…

"It's the smart home," says O'Sullivan. "In my house I have Amazon Alexa and the Echo Dot, Sonos as a sound system and Hive for my central heating. I buy off Amazon and stream music with Spotify. But what's impressed me is not just the way the

tech has developed, but the way these things all completely interface with each other. We have vendors that are not linked other than by handshakes and commercial relationships, and they have completely standardised and synchronised their interfacing."