

FROM THE INDUSTRY

Paddy Paddison

IN THE HOT SEAT

BY MELISSA COGAVIN, BROADBAND JOURNAL

A portrait of Paddy Paddison, a middle-aged man with grey hair, smiling. He is wearing a light blue button-down shirt under a dark blue blazer. The background is a solid grey.

PADDY PADDISON, NEWLY APPOINTED CEO OF INCA, IS A LEADING VOICE IN THE UK'S DRIVE TO DELIVER FULL-FIBRE AND GIGABIT-CAPABLE BROADBAND ACROSS THE NATION. WITH DECADES OF EXPERIENCE IN TELECOMS AND A PASSION FOR SUPPORTING THE INDEPENDENT NETWORK SECTOR, HE BRINGS STRATEGIC INSIGHT AND TECHNICAL EXPERTISE TO THE FOREFRONT OF DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE. UNDER HIS LEADERSHIP, INCA CONTINUES TO CHAMPION INNOVATION, INVESTMENT AND COLLABORATION IN THE RAPIDLY EVOLVING BROADBAND LANDSCAPE. MELISSA COGAVIN REPORTS.

TELL ME ABOUT YOUR BACKGROUND PADDY.

I was in the military, in the Royal Signal. I followed my dad into the army and spent 12 years there; posted out to Northern Ireland and then Cyprus; I earned a BTEC in Electrical Engineering and then they asked me to design a cable television system. It was the mid-90s, Sky was just starting up and it occurred to me perhaps there's something on the outside I should be doing. I got out of the army and joined CableCell. My foreman of signals from Northern Ireland saw my application and said oh I know him. That's how I got in.

The work developed into approaching local town councils designing and installing CCTV. We built this network, worked out how to monetise it for the clients; we did all sorts including front door cameras, so people could change the channel to see the front door. Then we developed a system for getting live pictures off trains, even in tunnels, so as the train went along, it handed over to different radios along the track. We deployed that on the Docklands Light Railway and as far as I know, it's still in operation.

HOW DID WILDANET GET STARTED?

In 2016, after running away to the seaside briefly to run a newsagent in Plymouth, my friend Ian Galbert, who I'd worked with at NTL called me and said, the Internet's rubbish in Cornwall, isn't it. He encouraged me to develop a broadband network there. We picked this village which was down the valley with trees the other side, making life as hard as possible, and we employed the logic that if you can do it here, we can do it anywhere.

It was a great success, Wildanet got off the ground; we were delighted by the take up and how we expanded across Cornwall. But the people that get right into the nook and cranny of everything, making marginal business improvements all the time tend to last longer than I do. I can't concentrate that long. In the end Helen Wilde, the CEO of Wildanet at the time and a good friend, took me aside and said, look, I think that's enough, Paddy.

SO YOU STEPPED AWAY.

I find if more than two days are the same, I can get a little disruptive. I'm not great with that. Once processes are in place and we know exactly what we're doing, you're in a routine, that is how you run a business well. I'm more motivated by 'what do I need to do different today to make it succeed?'

BUILDING SOMETHING AND MAINTAINING IT TAKE DIFFERENT TYPES OF ENERGY. I CAN RELATE. TELL ME ABOUT INCA AND YOUR VISION FOR THE FUTURE.

I've inherited a real bank of information and knowledge, some good policy stuff, data and industry information that people aren't that aware of. I want to tell people what INCA's been doing and help the altnets by making that voice louder. My role is about change and progression.

SOMETIMES IT TAKES A FRESH PAIR OF EYES TO APPRECIATE THE WEALTH OF KNOWLEDGE AVAILABLE IN AN ORGANISATION.

Exactly that. INCA is about 15 years old. Malcolm (Corbett) had taken it from inception. 15 years ago, altnets weren't a thing; making government understand they existed and doing reports that effect change in government was a huge undertaking. The future of gigabit Britain was one of those reports.

DO YOU HAVE A TWO-TO-FIVE-YEAR PLAN?

With consolidation in the market we need to be thinking about how INCA continues to exist. In five year's time, what does INCA look like and what does it do then? The focus now is preparing for the TAR (Telecoms Access Review), our response to that and possibly the government's SSP (Statement of Strategic Priorities) depending on what emerges from it.

HOW IS THAT GOING TO AFFECT YOU?

Digital inclusion is the big one. And one of the advantages the altnets have is that that's where they started. Most of us started those businesses to get good internet into places that didn't have it. We're champions around stopping the digital divide; there was a lot of altruism in amongst the drive to succeed in business.



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HAVE YOU WORKED IN THE NON-PROFIT SECTOR IN THE PAST?

No, so this is an interesting experience for me because it's not a business, it's about member value, not shareholder value. Every now and again, I have to remind myself how different it is. Your shareholders coming and telling you, I want you to do this today, and members saying no, I want you to do this today is a very different process.

One of the things that I've tried to do at INCA is create C-suite dinners, to get people together, because I'm all for cooperation. I think there are more things to be done together than to be done competitively.

GETTING YOUR MEMBERS TO SHARE A VISION IS WHAT RUNNING A TRADE ASSOCIATION IS ALL ABOUT.

It really is, and we are greater than the sum of our parts. Together we have a lot we can do to improve the industry for each other and future-proof the industry.

DO YOU HAVE ANY PLANS TO CHANGE OR EXPAND IN ANY AREAS OF INCA?

Not really. We're a whole four people. There's myself, Jill, Charissa and Liam. We're doing a rebrand, we're getting

some professional work done on that, so we should have a new look shortly. We are a lean organisation. But I am keen to promote the knowledge base and exploit what data we have for the benefit of the industry, and INCA ultimately.

WHAT DO YOU SEE COMING UP FOR INCA THAT YOU'RE GOING TO HAVE TO NAVIGATE?

For INCA itself, reduction in membership. There's going to be more and more regulation. I'm assuming the gap between now and onboarding of the new telecoms access review is what's going to guide us over the next few years. And of course, we've got to remember that we've got one big competitor in Openreach; we'll be watching what they do and trying to react to that. For altnets as the competitor, we've got to come in and do what they do, but do it better, do it faster, do it leaner, which is the advantage that smaller, newer companies have - they're more agile.

DO YOU THINK THERE'S ANYTHING INTRINSICALLY FLAWED WITH THE ALTNET BUSINESS MODEL?

No, not fundamentally. Yes, take-up is lower than expected, but that is part of the market failure that enabled altnets to exist in the first place; what is really missing is that the public aren't aware that there is a better solution available. The government, the regulators and Openreach are aligned on the national vision of getting gigabit Britain. But there doesn't seem to be a

connection between building it out and connecting people.

NOT THE FIRST TIME THE PUBLIC ARE THE LAST TO KNOW – THERE ARE PEOPLE UP POLES AND DIGGING HOLES ALL OVER THE COUNTRY BUT WHY IT'S HAPPENING ISN'T COMMUNICATED, NOR WHY IT'S AN OPPORTUNITY FOR THE PUBLIC EITHER.

That's where government could probably help there because they're good at telling the public what's good for them. A public information campaign could do a lot to help the industry. It could change the model for altnets but also change the model for Openreach as well – they need to transfer people over to fibre as well to modernise their network. So that's not something that we disagree on. Public awareness around that change would make the altnet model more viable.

There is plenty of work for Paddy and INCA lies ahead, reflective of the altnet sector and telecoms more broadly; these are concerns that affect us all. We are looking forward to supporting their important work and will keep you posted as they progress. Good luck Paddy!

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