SECURING

A NET-ZERO FUTURE

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Securing a net-zero future

A discussion dinner was held on the 27 of April, sponsored by BT and Palo Alto Networks and attended by senior executives from the public sector, energy, legal services, pharmaceuticals, and investment management. The event's title was 'How to secure a net-zero future'. The session was introduced by Jim Butler of Palo Alto Networks and Simon Warner of BT, and moderated by *Roger Camrass, Research Director of CIONET International.*

The context for the discussion

Politicians and corporate leaders have been keen to espouse the merits of clean energy and net-zero targets for many years. But for most people on the ground today the issue of climate change has been regarded as 'important' but not 'urgent', leaving this low on the priority list. IT and broader facilities management (estates and vehicles) have been lagging in this respect, especially given that IT generates 4-5 % of global carbon emissions, which could double in decades ahead.

The problem to date is that companies need help to measure their emissions and are thus reluctant to invest in the necessary tools and skills to tackle the issue. As one delegate stated, 'If you can't measure it, you can't manage it'.

A combination of tighter regulations and tangible economic benefits places a sharper edge on sustainability. These two factors should induce more action in the coming months and years.

Tackling IT emissions

The rapid growth of computing power to serve modern business is indisputable. New technologies like Artificial Intelligence (AI) will only accelerate this trend. But most IT organisations believe that migrating their computing into the cloud will leave the hyper-scalers to resolve sustainability issues, just as they are doing for cyber. Delegates were sceptical that such a move to the cloud would provide a satisfactory answer to their net-zero challenges.

For example, the cloud has encouraged programmers to exploit uncapped processing and storage capacity by increasing run times and coding volumes. Delegates were convinced that only a few programmers paid attention to software efficiencies or storage capacity once in the cloud. Instead, such volumes have increased due to a need for more control. One remedy is introducing sustainability standards into software development routines such as DevOps, as has been achieved with security and DevSecOps.

A renewed focus on estates

Estates attracted much discussion during the event. The NHS has one of the largest footprints of buildings and vehicles in the UK. One representative from the NHS commented that more attention should be given to energy efficiency across the estate, and the million-plus workers needed to be fully conscious of the carbon emissions they generate. Tools are available to measure building and vehicle carbon footprints, but lack of investment has prohibited their usage up until now. Given severe NHS budgetary constraints on infrastructure such as IT, it is hard to imagine that new hospital buildings have been designed with sustainability in mind.

The positive aspect of the current situation is that a sustainability drive can now be shown to produce strong economic benefits. A delegate from the Cabinet Office suggested that tighter controls on IT and estates could deliver millions of pounds of savings in months. Tighter contract management with key IT and construction vendors could also help reduce carbon emissions during and after procurement. Vendors will need to help their customers measure and control emissions throughout the lifetime of software and hardware solutions.

Regulations are tightening in Europe

Since 2018, Europe has actively developed regulations that cover sustainability and promote net-zero goals. Delegates were convinced that such moves could trigger a more severe campaign within corporates to address such issues. Mention was made of the following regulations:

- Non-financial and corporate sustainability reporting directives (NFRD and CSRD) that require companies large and small to measure and report their carbon emissions.
- Sustainable financial disclosure regulation (SFDR) that requires organisations to report on the financial investments made to offset carbon emissions.
- The UK environmental bill will help to discourage physical waste and pollution in cities and the countryside.

All these measures require corporates to employ external auditors to ensure they meet regulatory requirements internally and across the supply chain. Delegates mentioned Scopes 1, 2, and 3 as prime areas of concern. Organisations such as EY and PWC already offer such auditing services. One delegate commented,

"There will be no place to hide anymore."

A ninety-day action plan

Delegates were keen to offer specific actions to address sustainability including:

- Undertaking a complete inventory of IT and physical assets such as buildings and vehicles to assess current emission sources and volumes.
- Examining power sources for data centres and buildings to ensure full reliance on clean energy.
- Introducing sustainability standards and methods in software development and storage to reduce waste.

Next steps

Delegates and sponsors agreed that much work is needed to raise the profile of sustainability and net zero within IT and facilities. Corporate awareness has advanced over the past eighteen months with more public debate and pressure on vendors to demonstrate compliance. The introduction of further regulations across Europe will accelerate progress. The evening concluded that IT and Facilities should be leaders in applying standards given their high current contribution to corporate carbon emissions.

For IT, the challenge is to find vendors such as BT and Palo Alto Networks who share common goals and are prepared to co-invest in sustainable solutions. More attention must be given to cloud providers who must substantiate their sustainability credentials. Equally, Facilities must assess if and where current building stock meets the new environmental regulations. Delegates suspected that more than half of London buildings would fail to meet emerging sustainability standards.

All agreed that support from the organisation's top executives will be essential to mobilise the necessary resources for the net zero challenge. Delegates agreed this would take more than a handful of staff to move the needle significantly.

Useful links

Here are some links provided by the sponsors:

If you would like to know more about how BT can support your sustainability journey, visit: bt.com/digital-sustainability

BT Business' sustainability resources: Sustainability | BT's Global unit

Palo Alto Network's sustainability resources: Corporate Responsibility - Palo Alto Networks

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A pioneer of today's Internet as an ARPA research fellow at MIT in the seventies, Roger has spent over forty five years helping corporations harness the power of new technologies such as cloud, mobile communications, e-commerce, voice recognition and satellite. He was a partner at EY responsible for e-commerce during the dot.com boom. He is a graduate of Cambridge University and MIT, and a visiting professor at the University of Surrey.

See **rogercamrass.com**