

Conferencing via the cloud: Interview with Mark Richer, CEO StarLeaf

StarLeaf is a global collaboration and video meetings solution. The company is headquartered in Watford, and we employ over 200 people around the world. While we compete with Teams and Zoom, we do things quite differently - above all, we focus on providing enterprise customers with the best possible video-enabled collaboration.

Temps de lecture : minute

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We prioritise the security of meetings held on StarLeaf, next-to-no downtime (we have an industry-leading 99.999% uptime guarantee), as well as higher visual and audio quality than that of rivals. StarLeaf is much more compatible with other meeting providers, and we're making it easier to join a meeting on StarLeaf than on any other platform. We also support meetings both in the office, through solutions like StarLeaf Huddle and StarLeaf Room for Poly, and virtually, with fully featured StarLeaf available for computers and mobile devices.

How did you come to found the business?

Myself, William MacDonald and Mark Loney founded the business in 2008. This was an era when video conferencing involved buying and managing a complex web of servers and other kit, and even then you could mostly only talk to people with the same complex setup. We saw the opportunity for a simpler, easier way to deliver a conferencing solution via the cloud - we've since grown StarLeaf into one of the world's leading cloud-based

providers, without raising any external capital until 2017. The three of us have worked together for decades, and this is the fourth enterprise we've built together. We worked together at Madge Networks (Local Area Networking, floated on NASDAQ in 1993); Calista, (VOIP interoperability, sold to Cisco in 1999 for \$55M) and Codian (on-premise video bridging with interoperability, sold to Tandberg in 2007 for \$270M).

Who are your typical customers?

Our customers include larger enterprises, parliamentary bodies, local governments, law firms, education providers and healthcare organisations. But they all want the same thing: support with business collaboration and continuity, a reduction in communications complexity and down-time, and security they can rely on at all times. With messaging, meetings and calling, StarLeaf keeps teams working together whether they're at home or in the office, or moving between the two. We're enabling CEOs to connect with investors, healthcare professionals to consult with patients, and judges and courts to work remotely, as well as simply enabling people to collaborate more effectively on projects.

Unlike rivals, virtual pub quizzes and birthday parties are not our core focus!

Have you seen new sectors starting to use StarLeaf?

In March, we launched a free basic plan to sit alongside our enterprise offering - as a result, we've seen a big increase in call minutes (947% between January and May) over the course of the year. Sector-wise, we've seen an increase in legal organisations using StarLeaf, as well as

healthcare providers who are looking to maintain clinical care virtually and allow back-office staff to stay connected remotely.

Has StarLeaf benefited from COVID forcing people to work from home?

As a provider of technology that facilitates home working and, importantly, collaborative work, we've seen some areas of the business exceed expectations in 2020. This has been our strongest financial year to-date - we've seen revenues increase to \$15.1M in H1-20, and we saw a 947% increase in daily call minutes at the beginning of the pandemic. We have also seen an increase of 300% in new user sign-ups since the lockdown began in March.

How is StarLeaf different from Zoom and Microsoft Teams?

StarLeaf is a very different kettle of fish to both Zoom and Teams. If your organisation's IT operations are centred around Microsoft, Teams is probably the 'obvious' choice for your collaboration. But you're getting a complicated, bloated architecture, and it's mostly a closed solution - it's hard to collaborate with people using different collaboration solutions and systems. You don't get the 99.999% uptime guarantee you get with StarLeaf, and when things do go wrong, you're relying on being able to contact Microsoft to raise the issue (and fixes are not certain). It's a similar situation for organisations working with Zoom, with the added dimension of the security issues they have faced in the past.

Your rivals have had issues with cyber-

security - how have you addressed this at StarLeaf?

Security has been a core part of StarLeaf from the beginning - it's why we architect, run and maintain our own platform. Unlike rivals, we don't route information through China, we provide a data jurisdiction guarantee, meaning our customers decide where their data is stored and can be assured it always remains under their control. StarLeaf owns all of its servers, so we're not reliant on any third-parties to ensure that our service can stay up-and-running, which again, helps us ensure the cyber-resilience of our infrastructure. Our security measures have enabled us to achieve ISO/IEC 27001 certification, which is the most respected and internationally-recognised information security and compliance standard.

If a video conferencing system goes down, that can be a major issue for any enterprise - how do you ensure that you avoid downtime at StarLeaf?

Absolutely, in the era of remote working, we understand that the potential economic cost of downtime, for any organisation, could be exponential. Totally owning our own platform enables us to prevent many more risks than our competitors, and to identify and respond to incidents much more quickly and effectively too. It's very important that people can simply get on with their work, whenever and wherever they need to, and know StarLeaf will be there to support them, whatever sort of device or equipment they are using.

During the lockdown period, you've launched

a partnership with Poly and you've also launched Huddle - both of which aid office working, why the focus on AV equipment at the moment?

Well, these products and partnerships were developed before the pandemic hit. But seeing how organisations are currently working, the timing has been good. Before lockdown, we were already seeing a significant change in the way people used meeting spaces, with many organisations choosing to replace large boardrooms with more smaller huddle spaces. As people look to make offices as COVID-safe as possible, we are seeing customers using StarLeaf Huddle and StarLeaf Room for Poly as part of their back-to-office plans for Spring, to deliver the mix of office work and remote work they need.

Have your customers been enquiring about the Huddle product during the lockdown period? Has there been much interest in it since launch?

Yes absolutely, people are looking to the Huddle as a way to bridge the communications gap between those working remotely, and those working from the office. Collaborative work, and the platforms it relies on, will evolve again before the end of this pandemic - the near-certain future is a hybrid mix of remote and office working. Companies need technology that supports seamless collaboration across these two groups, and Huddle is one such option that organisations are looking to make use of.

Do you think we'll ever get back to the office full-time?

I think it will be a different outcome for every organisation. Remote working can be good for both employees, who benefit from reduced commute times and more time with family, and for businesses, who benefit from reduced operational/real estate costs. The office does have clear benefits though: it can be easier to train new or junior staff, and brainstorming and team-bonding is much more effective face-to-face. As such, what we will probably see is a mix of office working and home working patterns. What companies should now do though, is consider if the technology that was hastily adopted in March to facilitate remote working is up to scratch. Organisations now have a better idea of what the future of work will look like, and it's the right time to re-evaluate whether your collaboration solution is reliable and secure enough, and easy and straightforward to use.

Why is video conferencing so exhausting? Is there a danger that people will abandon it completely when they are fully back in the office?

The advent of remote working came about so rapidly that companies had to make rapid-fire decisions as to which video or collaboration tool to adopt. With hindsight, many companies didn't make the best decision. Whether that be through choosing something free or cheap that doesn't offer the right level of audio or visual quality, a service with poor reliability or security, or a solution that is difficult to use, these issues have left a sour taste in the mouth for many.

But it doesn't need to be this way. Easy-to-use, secure and reliable

alternatives are out there. Once companies start to make longer-term decisions on which collaboration provider is best for them, some of the 'teething pains' we've seen will disappear. At StarLeaf, we focus on providing easy-to-use, seamless collaboration.

With the right tools, video conferencing can become another way to collaborate, wherever your workplace is.



Read also

Getting back to the office is important, but we're still going to need video meetings

Article by Mark Richer

