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Software-Defined Networking Technologies to Reshape Market

in Computer Networking

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DATE: 2012-05-10 | By Michael Vizard
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Solution providers need to prepare for major change to the way networks are managed

Software-defined networking (SDN) may be one of the hottest new buzz words floating around the channel in the wake of the Interop 2012 conference this week.

But while most of the SDN conversation is focused on reducing the cost of managing enterprise networks by managing them at a much higher level of abstraction, the implications for the channel go well beyond simply making it easier to manage a network.The reason that most customers standardize on networking components from one vendor is because each additional piece of networking equipment from a different vendor increases the complexity of the environment. The increased complexity makes it more difficult to manage the environment, which then drives up the total cost of the overall IT environment. Minimizing those costs has been the central tenet of the case Cisco makes about why IT organizations should standardize on Cisco equipment from end to end regardless of the price of any particular piece of equipment.

But with the advent of SDN technologies companies such as Hewlett-Packard and ADARA Networks are making the case that SDN technologies will make it more practical for IT organizations to build and manage multi-vendor networks. By way of example, HP at Interop this week announced a partnership with F5 Networks under which the latter company's application delivery controllers can now be managed as an extension to HP's Virtual Application Network (VAN).

According to Kash Shaikh, director of marketing for HP Networking, the alliance with F5 Networks allows HP to extend the reach of its SDN technology up to Layers 4 through 7 of the networking model. In effect, what SDN technologies do is eliminate the need for command line interfaces in favor of providing customers with a new virtual control plane, says Shaikh.

Similarly, the folks at ADARA Networks are also making a case of greater amount of network freedom thanks to SDNs. In particular, ADARA Networks CEO Eric Johnson notes that SDN technology will also serve as a base platform that will allow developers to invoke a broad range of network services that were previously difficult to access. That should foster the development of a community that will contribute to the ongoing enhancement of SDN technologies and related applications.

What all this means to the channel is that it should become a lot easier to sell alternative networking equipment. Cisco obviously has a huge installed base of customers and is making its own investments in SDN technologies. But there's no doubt that the advent of SDN technologies should lower resistance to deploying networking equipment from multiple vendors, especially if customer's are advised to pursue a platform-independent approach towards adding a new layer of networking management software across the enterprise.

Cisco partners, meanwhile, will have to decide to what degree they may want to stay loyal to Cisco at a time when clarion calls for more open approaches to managing the network are starting to be heard up and down the channel.

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