Channel Partners Poised to Help Enterprises Build Software-Defined Networks

John Moore (CIO (US)) | 15 January, 2013 14:19 | Comments | Like 1 | 0

Software-defined networking (SDN) is an emerging field, subject to some confusion and very much an early-adopter exercise at the moment.

Channel partners-resellers, systems integrators and consultancies-often carve niches in such immature fields, providing advice and deployment help to customers who lack sufficient in-house knowledge. That tendency is beginning to play out in SDN. Technology vendors have already started recruiting integrators and other channel allies. The companies that seek to populate the SDN channel say they are studying the technology so they can be in a position to assist customers.

IT managers, however, suggest SDN adopters may or may not need channel support. Cloud service providers and academic institutions-who are considered the first wave of SDN deployment-typically possess deep technical skills and prefer to accumulate their own expertise rather than hire outsiders.

[Get the latest news on the Australian government in CIO's Government newsletter]

Related: Ex-Facebook Exec Pushes Software-Defined Networks

General enterprise adopters, on the other hand, will likely seek the help of SDN advisors and implementers, according to industry executives. They believe the channel will become a key conduit for SDN in the enterprise. "Enterprises are technology deployers, not developers," says Eric Johnson, chairman and chief executive officer of ADARA Networks, which makes SDN software. "It is absolutely expected' a certainty that SDN should be adopted through the channel."

SDN Poised to Replace Legacy Network Infrastructure

ADARA, and a host of other vendors ranging from established networking players to startups, target a market poised to rapidly expand. IDC projects that the worldwide SDN market will surge from $360 million in 2013 to $3.7 billion by 2016. For its part, ADARA works with three dozen partners in its year-old channel program and has deals with an additional 90 partners in the works, Johnson says.

Such lofty expectations are based on SDN's potential to revitalize network architecture. SDN provides a software layer that lets administrators centrally program switches and other network devices.

In a traditional network setting, a request for a new service prompts a series of manual configuration tasks as administrators work with standalone pieces of networking gear. SDN, however, lets administrators program and automate an entire network fabric. This flexibility dovetails with initiatives such as cloud computing, with its dynamic provisioning of resources.

Share

Related Whitepapers

- Expanding Web Single Sign-On to Cloud and Mobile Environments
- Tranzqual Improves User Experience for Mobile Workforce
- Twelve Things to Consider When Implementing Mobile BI

Latest Stories

- Local Zendesk chief seeks to 'double everything' over next 12 months
- IBM taps social media at Australian Open
- NBN training centre launched in Adelaide
- Melanoma apps put users at risk, researchers say
- Virgin Australia responds to Sabre system issues

Community Comments

"Good article on Social CRM. Just read a whitepaper on this very ..."
How to get the most out of social CRM this year

"Thank you Brandon Butler for posting this article it is informative. BTW, ..."
HP appoints networking expert to lead cloud unit in exec shakeup

"oh shut the hell up you idiots, the markert share has GROWN. ..."
Windows 8 fails to lift the PC market in Q4

"Their pay rates are appalling. These filthy rich companies make a packet ..."
Workers strike at Foxconn supplier in China

"Why Google doesn't show the number of search results due to copyright ..."
Google stops highlighting censored

MOST READ | MOST COMMENTED

1   5 open source help desk apps to watch
2   How to create a clear project plan
3   10 Tips for Dealing with a Bully Boss
4   5 open source billing systems to watch
5   Q&A: Luxottica Retail APAC CIO, Stephen McKinnon

Get exclusive access to Invitation only events CIO, reports & analysis.
Sign up now »

Username
••••••••

Latest Jobs

F   Flash / ActionScript Developer   NSW
F   Flash / ActionScript Developer   NSW
F   Flash / ActionScript Developer   NSW
F   Flash / ActionScript Developer   NSW

Show all jobs

Zones

Anthony Robbins, vice president of federal sales at Brocade Communications Systems, described SDN as an opportunity to address outmoded networking infrastructure. (Brocade in November disclosed plans to acquire on-demand networking vendor Vyatta in a bid to extend its SDN reach.)

"Network infrastructure today is old and full of products designed for client/server-type applications," Robbins explains. "As servers and the data center have become more and more virtualized, the traffic across the network&has changed dramatically. But there hasn't been a fundamental shift in the design of the network."

Analysis: Dell: SDN Won't Turn Enterprise Switches Into Commodity Gear for 3-5 Years

SDN seeks to address a key problem with legacy network design: The proliferation of individual devices and control planes. "SDN makes all of these devices programmable-centrally and universally programmable-through a software layer, said Jason Matlof, vice president of marketing at Big Switch Networks, a startup open-source SDN vendor.

Software-Defined Networking Nascent, Processes Evolving

While vendors articulate a similar SDN endgame, they disagree on how to get there.

For example, some technology providers support OpenFlow, a protocol that enables servers to send instructions to switches to direct network traffic. Other vendors use proprietary application programming interfaces (APIs) instead. A further complication is the inevitability of "me too" vendors that will slap the SDN label on their products no matter how tangential.

Against this backdrop, channel partners believe they can carve out a niche guiding customers through a nascent technology. "We can weed through the FUD," says Joe Brown, president and co-founder of Accelera Solutions, which that focuses on virtualization. "We can help them plan [to] take advantage of these technologies as they are brought to the market."

Sudhir Verma, chief services officer at solutions provider Force 3, says his company monitors SDN developments with the goal of helping customers make informed decisions. "We have to look at all such technologies where there is a possibility of innovating the way IT is run today," he says. "We are definitely interested in looking at SDN' seeing where the market takes us and where the trend is going."

Who Needs Software Defined Networking Help?

Channel players pursuing SDN as a niche may encounter a high level of self-sufficiency among early adopters. Cloud services providers, hosting firms and colocation companies stand at the vanguard of SDN deployment. Those companies, for which the network is the core business as opposed to a support function, generally maintain considerable technical resources.

DreamHost, a Web hosting and cloud services company in Brea, Calif., is deploying the Nicira network virtualization platform for its public cloud, which competes with Amazon. (VMware acquired Nicira in July.) The SDN-enabled cloud, where Nicira plugs into OpenStack Quantum Networking-as-a-Service technology, was in a private beta testing phase at press time.

News: Oracle Buys Xsigo for Software-defined Networking

When it comes to SDN, DreamHost relies on its own skills and Nicira's capabilities as an implementation partner. "We like to have as much of that expertise on our team as possible," says Jonathan LaCour, vice president of software development at DreamHost. "We have quite a bit of on-staff expertise and knowledge and we want to&grow that. I'm not sure a company like us, who wants to be a technology leader, is going to be out shopping for third-party services in this area."

The story is similar at Colocation America. Albert Ahdoot, business development director, says the company plans to deploy SDN next year, noting that SDN is expected to provide better network traffic flow. If the project goes forward, Colocation America will use its own personnel rather than outside consultants, Ahdoot adds.

Hostway, meanwhile, may also adopt SDN, building upon its Microsoft-based cloud. The cloud hosting company uses Microsoft Hyper-V as its virtualization layer and System Center Virtual Machine Manager as its management control layer, notes Mike Robski, vice president of research and development at Hostway. The company is now looking tap Windows Server 2012's Hyper-V Network Virtualization feature as its pathway to SDN. He says the key benefit of SDN is the ability to isolate customer networks.

Robski says Hostway provides firewalls for customers' virtual machines, protecting them from outside intruders. Internally, those virtual machines are set up on the same network; conceivably, one cloud customer could access another's virtual machines.

Windows Server 2012 network virtualization provides the ability to set up completely isolated virtual networks for each customer on the same physical network, Robski says. However, he adds, lack of third-party support keeps Hostway from immediate deployment. "One of the components we are currently missing is the gateway device that sits in front of the virtualized networks," Robski says, adding that a couple vendors are working on gateway products.

Third-party consulting support is less of an issue. Robski says Hostway uses its internal staff and leverages its partnership with Microsoft. That said, Robski points to a role for third-party consultants in helping customers connect their on-premises networks to their Hostway-provided virtualized networks.

In that situation, customers will have to maintain their own expertise or use an outside consultant to configure and set up network virtualization on their end, he says. Hostway doesn't plan to provide that particular service to customers. "We are hoping there will be a lot of consultants providing this kind of expertise," Robski says.

Enterprise, Channel Prospects Emerge for SDN Firms

Consultants and other channel partners look to play a bigger role as more enterprises consider SDN adoption.

LaCour believes consulting ecosystems will begin to develop around particular enterprise SDN solutions. He says the traditional networking vendors now entering the SDN space will follow a model similar to the one they have taken with other technologies: Cultivate large networks of certified engineers to support a given product category. "I can see the same thing happening on the SDN side," LaCour says.

Indeed, vendors that range from long-time players to relative newcomers are building channels for their SDN wares.

Dave Butler, vice president of sales at Big Switch, says his company is teaming with technology partners that augment its core offering and a handful of integrators. The integrators provide thought leadership, project management skill and the ability to debug deployments.

Butler says most, if not all, SDN projects will eventually involve an integrator. "It's going from zero to 100 percent. Right now, we have just picked a very few [integrators] and they are tightly coupled to what we do." Big Switch plans, over time, to build a certification process for its partners, Butler adds.

News: Hewlwtt-Packard Aims 3-Part Effort at Network Virtualization

VMware also works with partners. The company has been active in

Follow CIO

network virtualization for a couple of years and views that technology as an SDN enabler.

VMware and its partners currently focus on network virtualization, rather than full-blown SDN, according to Hatem Naguib, vice president of cloud networking and security for VMware. Naguib said the VMware vCloud Suite enables network virtualization for the VMware technology stack, while Nicira accomplishes the same task for customers using non-VMware hypervisors.

To support the channel, VMware has mapped its solution competencies very tightly toward vCloud Suite capabilities, Naguib says. The company doesn't offer vCloud Suite certification at present, but that doesn't mean it won't happen in the future, he adds.

At ADARA, meanwhile, Johnson says he believes the company's expanding roster of channel allies will find a market that is broadening in terms of geography and customer set. Interest in SDN was initially concentrated in major metropolitan areas on both coasts, but the technology has since gained solid traction in the Midwest and Southeast as well, he says.

As for customers, Johnson reports interest across a range of vertical markets, from financial services to consumer products. "It's not just service providers."

Joe Ambrosole, president of NetConnect, a New York-area network solutions provider and ADARA partner, agrees that the SDN market is moving beyond service providers to enterprises and even mid-sized accounts. "We see more and more people interested," he says. "I think it is only a matter of time until it becomes a technology that everyone is going to be looking at."

John Moore has written on business and technology topics for more than 20 years. His areas of focus include mobile app development, health IT, cloud computing, government IT and distribution channels. Follow everything from CIO.com on Twitter @CIOonline, on Facebook, and on Google +.

Read more about infrastructure services in CIO's Infrastructure services Drilldown.

Join the CIO Australia group on LinkedIn. The group is open to CIOs, IT Directors, COOs, CTOs and senior IT managers.

Bookmark this page	
Share this article	0
Got more on this story? Email CIO	
Follow CIO on	

Comments

Post new comment