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Cloud Group Aims for Speedy Specs

There's no shortage of industry standards bodies. But the CloudEthernet Forum (CEF) is not only trying to make itself heard in a busy space, but it is also aiming to change the way specifications/standards get done.

The group, founded a year ago, has just embarked on development of its first standard, for a virtual machine connection between two separate data centers.

But its goal is to dramatically speed up the standards-setting process. Telecom industry groups typically take two to four years to create a standard, saysCloudEthernet Forum president James Walker. But a cloud industry body working at that pace would render itself "irrelevant."

That's not just the CEF view. Walker says that's been the message from cloud heavyweights such as Amazon.com Inc. (Nasdaq: AMZN), Google (Nasdaq: GOOG) and Microsoft Corp. (Nasdaq: MSFT). To win their support, the forum will have to show it can create a standard in six to eight months.

The key is the Open Cloud Project (OCP), which allows cloud providers and enterprises to test their current services against a reference architecture. Set up in Silicon Valley two months ago in partnership with affiliate Metro Ethernet Forum (MEF), Walker describes it as an "experiment." (See Open Cloud Project Formed.)

"Nobody has done this before. But the way to answer the question of how we do standards very quickly is iterative development."

It means the standard will be a "permanent work in progress. There won't be a daily software release, but it will go through 0.1, 0.2 etc. monthly."

With the OCP, he's confident the forum can deliver its first standard, CloudE 1.0, by year-end. (See CloudEthernet Forum Unveils CloudE 1.0 Framework.)

CEF members include vendors such as Ericsson AB (Nasdaq: ERIC) and Hewlett-Packard Co. (NYSE: HPQ), data center players such as Equinix Inc.(Nasdaq: EQIX), and key cloud tech contributors such as Cyan Inc. and Chef Software Inc., but it badly needs the industry giants to jump on board to be a success.

Walker, who is vice-president of managed services at Tata Communications Ltd. (NYSE: TCL), says the big players can see the benefit of open standards, but want to see that the CEF can deliver.

He says his interest in the problem began when Tata looked at deploying virtualization route reflectors. "We had no idea how many virtual machines we needed. There was no environment, short of us building it, to test out how that worked."

The underlying driver is the growth in the cloud services and the proliferation of hybrid environments. In 2012, already 40% of enterprises were using or expecting to use hybrid cloud, and 77% had it as a component of their strategy, Walker said. Forrester predicts 74% of enterprises will deploy hybrid cloud by 2016.

Right now the US market alone has more than 400 cloud providers, with "no consistency in interfaces, provisioning, APIs or locations." But enterprises want "dynamic end-to-end provisioning." If they want to move a virtual machine from a data center into Amazon's cloud, they will want to do that instantaneously.

"So that means I have to have an interface that allows me to take an order from a customer, provision it against a cloud exchange or an Equinix, and provision it against Amazon, and I need to have a common set of interfaces to do that," notes Walker. "We have enterprises making this move from a traditional IT environment to this new cloud-enabled cloud hybrid environment and that brings a lot of context."

— Robert Clark, contributing editor, special to Light Reading