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CloudEthernet Forum defining cloud interoperability

Friday, 31 May, 2013

Last week during the Ethernet Innovation Summit at the Computer History Museum in Mountain View, California, the establishment of the CloudEthernet Forum was announced. What is this forum, who's in it and will it make a difference?

CIOs and decision-makers across every sector and industry have deployment of cloud-based solutions well and truly on their radar. However, pulling together multiple solutions from different service providers and getting them to work well together and deliver enterprise-grade business continuity and disaster recovery can be a challenge.

A new industry forum that brings together relevant stakeholders to work towards maximising the effective use of ethernet to meet the rapidly evolving needs of cloud service users has been established. The CloudEthernet Forum (CEF) comprises a number of vendors. The founders are Alcatel-Lucent, Avaya, Equinix, HP, Juniper Networks, PCCW Global, Spirent, Tata Communications and Verizon. Membership to the forum costs \$15,000.

Their primary goal is the use of ethernet to standardise the way storage is managed and shared across providers. However, rather than defining and enforcing conformity to specific standards, their aim is a focus on interoperability rather than rigid adherence to specific rules.

Standards compliance is obviously important but the trouble with defining technical specifications is that they usually only define minimum requirements. That can lead to situations where technical compliance is achieved but interoperability is not achieved.

A good example of this is the popular docx format for word processor documents. Although docx is an IEEE standard, opening a complex, standards compliant document from one word processing application in another doesn't ensure full integrity of all the document layout and formatting. Similarly, it might be the case that data stored with one cloud provider may adhere to a standard but attempts to move that data to another provider or even create a mirror for business continuity is stymied by interoperability issues. This can happen even if both data centres comply with the same standards.

The CEF is engaging manufacturers and service providers right across every element of the cloud. By working together, the aim is to address technological issues of evolving cloud service infrastructures. The CEF intends to engage with data centre providers, WAN service providers, system integrators, network equipment manufacturers, cloud service providers and cloud infrastructure providers.

The key technology underpinning the CEF's efforts is ethernet. Now in its 40th year, ethernet is a key technology that will underpin the CEF's work. During a panel discussion following the announcement, James Walker, president of the CEF, said, "One of the great things about ethernet is that it has remained a constant. This forum is a continuation of that consistency. As we look forward to the role of ethernet in the future, we need to refine and improve the behaviour of ethernet in a large-scale data centre environment."

What's this mean for CIOs?

The IT industry has always had groups of interested parties come together to establish standards for different things. However, the work is often difficult as it's driven by the self-interest of specific parties. Everyone wants their technical solution to be the one so that they can control it and derive royalties or other benefits.

If the CEF meets its aim, it will be good news for CIOs. It will simplify the task of choosing cloud providers, as interoperability between different providers will be easily identified. Service providers that adhere to CEF standards will interoperate. That means it will be possible, for example, to store data with one service provider and have a hot spare established with another service provider so that business continuity can be assured.