



Head in the clouds but feet on the ground – meet the CloudEthernet Forum...

Yes – another industry forum, but one driven by an urgent need and accelerated by close collaboration with the very dynamic MEF. We interview James Walker, president of the CloudEthernet Forum and vice president of Managed Network Services, Tata Communications

The big news at the NetEvents Ethernet Innovation Summit Ethernet Cloud discussion, May 23rd, in Silicon Valley's Computer History Museum included MEF president, Nan Chen, announcing a new Service Operations Committee followed by James Walker, vice president of Managed Network Services, Tata Communications announcing the launch of a new industry alliance, the CloudEthernet Forum of which he is now president.

The aim of the CloudEthernet Forum, we were informed, is to address the specific issues of scaling and applying Ethernet technologies for delivering cloud services. The eleven founding members are: Alcatel Lucent, Avaya, Citrix, Equinix, Huawei, HP, Juniper, PCCW Global, Spirent Communications, Tata Communications and Verizon.

One clear message was that user demand was a key driver in the launch of The CloudEthernet Forum. As Walker explained: "Four years ago we [Tata] migrated our Ethernet over SDH services to native Ethernet over PBB and it is proving highly popular with our datacenter customers. They love Ethernet's simplicity and scalability and want more. However, as datacenter networks become larger and more sophisticated, they are coming up against challenges, and the CloudEthernet Forum is committed to resolving those issues."

So, a new industry forum – described as "an MEF organization that will operate independently" – raised a number of interesting questions and I took the opportunity to interview James Walker for clarification. The following is a distillation of our interview.

Was the CloudEthernet Forum an MEF initiative?

No, as I mentioned it was a response to a need arising in the industry itself. However we decided to collaborate with the MEF for several reasons. One is that we share some common objectives around the promotion of Ethernet as a universal communications language. Another is that the MEF already has well established structures and procedures that would help us to get up and running more quickly. So it was an independent initiative, but one that has chosen to work with the MEF.

What then is the real difference between the MEF and the CloudEthernet Forum?

Basically, the MEF focuses on Ethernet services – the standards that allow carriers to communicate and interoperate using Ethernet. The CloudEthernet Forum takes a slightly broader view as it doesn't just focus on Ethernet but looks at the requirements of cloud service providers and large datacenter operators and the interaction between the Ethernet

layer and the cloud orchestration and operational layer. So we are more focused on a vertical sector but are looking at more than just the individual technologies in that context.

But why a new forum? Why not just another working group within the MEF?

Again this reflects the needs of the members. Although the MEF and The CloudEthernet Forum might quite often overlap in terms of corporate membership, the two forums serve quite different groups within the companies. While the MEF typically has representation among network-oriented groups, interest in The CloudEthernet Forum arose among datacenter, cloud and application-oriented groups – so even as an MEF workgroup it would have meant starting afresh and speaking to different departments. What's more, The CloudEthernet Forum could be highly relevant to some datacenter and cloud companies that have no direct interest in Carrier Ethernet and the MEF.

Will the MEF exert an influence over the CloudEthernet Forum?

The CloudEthernet Forum has its own independent board and funding, so the MEF will not be directly involved in what areas should be examined or issues addressed. Of course there will be companies that are members of both forums, and they will have a MEF perspective on the work of the CloudEthernet Forum. However, any standards ratified by the CloudEthernet Forum will need to be endorsed by the MEF for obvious reasons.

What do you say to those people who think we already have too many industry forums?

What is "too many"? If you have forums that overlap excessively, covering the same areas, the same membership and interests – even worse if they are producing conflicting standards – then there are certainly too many. As I explained, this is not the case with the CloudEthernet Forum – the people asking for it didn't feel they could be effectively represented by more network-centric forums. Also, the speed with which it was formed shows just how much it is needed: discussions began last December and by May the forum was launched

What is the CloudEthernet Forum membership fee, and what do companies get for their money?

For an organization to join either the MEF or the CloudEthernet Forum individually, the annual fee is \$15,000. However, because of the way we see membership evolving, membership of the CloudEthernet Forum will be \$10,000 for an existing MEF member, and vice versa.

Our aim is to hold four face-to-face meetings a year – in different geographic regions for international members. Members can vote and take part in the various technical and marketing initiatives and working groups, they have access to all the work of those groups and effectively that gives them a say in the way datacenter infrastructures will develop and support future cloud services.

You mentioned different geographical areas – just how international is the CloudEthernet Forum ?

Our founding members cover a broad sweep from Asia, across Europe and North America already, and we expect that international coverage to extend to every region. We will be holding meetings and recruiting new members across the world.

Might the CloudEthernet Forum become as big as the MEF?

It's a member driven organization and it addresses a wide ranges of industry constituencies – as nearly every company will be a user of cloud services – so yes it definitely could reach the same scale as the MEF. But that is just potential, and we are in no way inviting the MEF to a race!

Could you say a bit more about the synergy between the MEF and CloudEthernet Forum?

We begin with a shared vision of Ethernet as the universal enabler, then the MEF focuses on defining Ethernet-based services while the CloudEthernet Forum addresses the specific Ethernet-oriented scaling, transport and management needs of the datacentre and storage. Meanwhile the two forums have a set of similar needs: we need structure, we need intellectual property rights agreements, we need collaboration tools and committees and so on – all areas where the MEF has already gained a lot of experience and skills. Sharing those resources and learning means the CloudEthernet Forum can come to market in record time – so there are synergies in terms of objectives and synergies in terms of mechanics between the two. For the MEF, the advantages are that this close collaboration will enable strategically important 'cross-pollination' between the forums, and enable the MEF to expand its exposure to a wider number of cloud service stakeholders.

Will the CloudEthernet Forum be a standards body and will it be responsible for certification?

It is too early to answer that. We have begun with a set of issues needing to be addressed and we need to start work on those. Whether we decide that the best way to resolve them will be by creating standards and/or a certification program will be best decided later.

How would the two forums resolve conflict or disagreement?

Our intention is to focus on areas that are not already being addressed, so we will not be duplicating any of the work of the MEF, IEEE, ONF etc – in fact we will collaborate with other standards bodies to make sure that this does not happen and if issues arrive that come under the remit of another standards body or forum we will pass it on to them. With a fair number of shared members it makes sense not to allow conflicts to arise in the first place. Especially in the case of the MEF, we are co-locating our quarterly meetings for the convenience of members and so any potential conflicts would become apparent and be resolved early on rather than a situation arising where years of work have gone into something that then needs to be defended.

Will content providers join the CloudEthernet Forum?

Yes, we've already had signs of interest from content providers – they have their content and they need an infrastructure to manage it and it needs to be geographically distributed, so they are interested in putting forward their ideas about datacenter architecture and

getting back best practice tips from other providers. That's a good example of how our membership could differ from the MEF's: we have already spoken to an advertising agency that generates a terabyte per day of material – mostly video – needing to be stored, managed and moved, that sort of company could well join the CloudEthernet Forum but would have little interest in developing Carrier Ethernet services in the MEF.

OK and thank you. So, you have launched the CloudEthernet Forum – what happens now?

Now the work begins. We are setting up technical committees and already have three initial areas of concern – VLAN scaling, layer 2 performance and resilience across very large domains, and consolidating storage network technologies onto Ethernet. We will shortly be issuing a white paper describing the issues and the Marketing Committee will be talking to other organisations to explain what we are doing as well as looking for potential members.

Our first face to face meeting will be in Montreal on July 23rd, following which we will have a lot more to announce in terms of new members and a clear roadmap for the way forward.

Summary

Yes, another industry forum. But it is clear that the CloudEthernet Forum has been launched in response to a very real need. If it succeeds in enabling cloud service providers, carriers and enterprises to build and manage very large amounts of computing and storage capacity to suit the performance, scaling, regulatory and cost requirements of cloud services, then the CloudEthernet Forum could become as great a success as MEF's Carrier Ethernet services very quickly.

So we look forward with great interest to the CloudEthernet's Forum's announcements following the first meeting in Montreal on July 23rd.