

WIRELESS IS SO NOT ABOUT WIRELESS NETWORKING ANYMORE

How can wireless not be “about” wireless?

Let me clarify: today, as we stand in THIS SPOT in the wireless networking universe, never has the WLAN paradigm been so complicated. Yeah, we still need to get APs out there and provide access to wireless clients, but sitting through the sessions at Wireless Field Day 5 has me waxing philosophical.

Like frogs in a pot, we've all been slowly boiling in increasingly complex waters over the last few wireless years, and it's easy to not notice that it's happening.

Having sat through excellent sessions with WLAN vendors and toolmakers, it's safe to say that to be in the wireless game today means being more diversified in skills and general IT sensibility than ever before.

As the 11ac tide starts to rise, we're all faced with decisions:

- When do we start taking our own networks to 11ac?
- When do advise our customers to move to 11ac?
- Is moving to 11ac a given for everyone?
- Is 11ac the juncture where we consider changing WLAN vendors?
- Is 11ac the juncture where we look more at cloud-managed options?"

These are easy enough to grasp, and behind each of these questions there are other questions regarding the states of our installed network wiring, what generation switches we're running, what version of PoE we're on, etc. **But these issues are rather pedestrian compared to what else is afoot right now under the umbrella heading of “wireless networking”.**

While marketing departments still like to lead with “we have the best APs! Look how freakin' fast we are!”, there is a lot more to consider as our WLANs modernize.

Along with the radio technology and bandwidth sides of 11ac, we're facing an onslaught of factors to grapple with- like:

- a slew of analytical capabilities and ways to use that data
- device onboarding that can be as nuanced as your mind can dream up
- the ability to assign access privileges to device types, user types, application types, locations, times of day, and combinations of any and all of these
- application visibility and taking action on what you see
- the system administration of complicated management systems that frequently fall on WLAN types (somebody has to keep them up)
- the increased number of bugs that come with the floodwaters of new features

- a procession of ancillary services and servers that don't directly have anything to do with client devices talking to APs, yet each is part of the bigger picture

You can make the point that none of these really have anything to do with 11ac per se and are better suited for policy and staffing discussions, but here are my counter points to that:

- To “go” to 11ac, you likely have to upgrade code on controllers, management systems, or whatever magic is afoot in cloudland
- When you upgrade, you get lots and lots of features that you didn't ask for - you're already buying them (unless they take stand-alone licensing, which is its own story in inconstancy across vendors)
- The more features you use, the more you have to troubleshoot, debug, define policy for, educate users and support staff on, and watch over for issues
- The ancillary services in use for our WLANs frequently take more effort to keep on the rails than the wireless environment itself does
- Almost any part of the environment has the ability to convince users that the WLAN itself is borked, when the problem may actually be off in the hinterlands of the ecosystem

Put it all another way- 11ac makes WLAN more complicated, but the accompanying backdrops and backstories of our networks are also getting dizzyingly busier. So busy in fact that they can make talking about 11ac itself seem like the easy part of the equation.

I'm not bitching, mind you- but just taking note. These are complicated times for wireless networkers, and sometimes "wireless" really has nothing to do with wireless.

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