



THE OPEN PLAN LAN

Companies have to start opening up their networks... intelligently, says Alex Raistrick, Director Northern Europe at ConSentry Networks.

Remember how the physical office environment used to be? Cubicles, lots of closed doors, partitioned departments, employees not mixing with their peers. The crude intention was to segregate staff so that they could work quietly, without disruption or disturbances, yet it created an environment that didn't foster collaboration so much as stifle it.

Now think of the open plan offices we work in today, which encourage collaboration. Interaction, consultation, communication, visibility, hot desking. Open, but still controlled. Similarly, to compete in today's economy; to achieve better efficiencies and greater employee productivity; to adhere to compliance regulations and put themselves in a position to adopt new services and technologies, it's time for companies to unshackle and open up their LANs.

As Gartner recently noted though, this has to be done while maintaining control over users; organisations must 'loosen control without losing control.'

Enterprises therefore need an 'open plan LAN' strategy to effectively manage user access and enable transparency into user actions. Opening up the LAN presents some serious risks however, and there are a number of factors to consider – the substantial use of contractors and outsourcers, the prevalence of networked non-user devices, increasingly distributed digital data storage, the rise of Web 2.0 facilitating collaboration and sharing between users.

The result is a more varied set of users demanding greater access to more data on the LAN. The LAN, however, hasn't evolved in the same way the business has. The fact is, it's stuck in 1980s design, with a lack of visibility into, and control over, both users and applications.

As such, LAN management methods and technologies have been limited and unable to deliver what's really needed – an environment that is open yet secure – with blunt, static options like VLANs, ACLs, third-party applications, and disparate devices adding significant overhead.

These rudimentary controls are unwieldy, time consuming, inadequate in terms of security, and don't deliver a structure conducive to embracing new and future business models and technologies.

They often don't even give the IT function the visibility and control they need. Instead, in order to create the truly open plan LAN, IT needs new networking foundations.

Intelligent switching; built-in user and application control; network visibility by user, role, server, and file; application-based intelligence and services like prioritisation at Layer 7 – these are the tools that are required.

This intelligence, however, has to be delivered via platforms that offer operational simplicity (and come at an acceptable cost) if organisations are to gain the requisite ROI.

Having intelligence built directly into the LAN will enable the network to keep pace with the evolving requirements of both the business and the IT department – a capability that today's LANs fall far short of delivering. ■